

A Collection of Short Stories #2

by Jonathan Olvera

Manuscript Submission

Date: May 11, 2025

Author Contact:

Jonathan Olvera

226 E South Mountain Ave #4

Phoenix, AZ 85042

Email: jonolvera776@gmail.com

Phone: 480.819.8946

This manuscript is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

30,790 Word Count

**A Collection of Short
Stories #2**
by
Jonathan Olvera

Phoenix, Arizona
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Author's Preface
by Jonathan Olvera

Welcome, dear reader.

This second volume of short stories is a continuation of an experiment in voice, genre, and spirit — a living anthology of the people, places, dreams, and absurdities that shape the way I view the world. Some stories were born from late-night laughter, others from early-morning conviction. Many came from somewhere in between — that space where memory, myth, and imagination blur into one.

In these pages, you'll find forgotten laborers, suburban heroes, caffeinated saints, and legendary beings. From Arizona deserts to intergalactic councils, from Martian outposts to backyard rebellions, the stories are connected not by timeline or universe but by a persistent question: *What does it mean to carry meaning in a chaotic world?* Sometimes that answer looks like a joke. Sometimes it looks like a miracle.

A few of the pieces — such as *The Tree She Left Me* by Elena and *The Light Upon the Rock* by Annette Hale — are contributions from kindred voices whose inclusion brings new resonance and reflection. Others — like *The Honking Accord of 2025* and *Joe Alvarez vs. Nassir Inshallah* — are deliberate attempts to stretch humor into something pointed and profound.

This collection reflects a deeply personal, often spiritual journey. I explore faith, justice, legacy, and exile not as fixed doctrines but as living elements — things we wrestle with, return to, laugh about, and grieve over. Fiction allows these elements to grow roots in strange soil.

Thank you for reading. Thank you for returning. Whether this is your first journey into my world or you've followed my work before, I hope you find something here that stays with you — a laugh, a prayer, or simply a story worth telling again.

With gratitude and wonder,
Jonathan Olvera
Phoenix, Arizona
2025

The Tree She Left Me

By Elena

My grandmother passed away quietly, leaving behind little in terms of possessions —just a weathered cottage she could barely afford, and a life full of strength, hardship, and quiet dignity. But what she truly left me was a tree.

It stood at the edge of the garden, modest and gnarled, bearing the weight of many seasons. In her last letter to me, written with shaking hands, she wrote:

“Elena, I leave you this tree. It bears good fruit. It is not large, and it is not young. I’ve tended to it, replanted it, even replaced it once—but it is still the same. I want you to find meaning in it.”

At first, I didn’t understand. It was just a tree—bent, brittle, its bark cracked from too many dry summers. But something pulled me toward it. I began to look closely: the curve of the branches, the soft rustle of its leaves, the little knots in its bark that looked almost like the folds of a wise old face.

It was then I began to see her in it.

Messages seemed to hide in the tree's textures—the leaves whispered her lullabies when the wind passed through, and the fruit, though few, tasted like her kitchen smelled on rainy afternoons. Even the pits held meaning, like tiny seeds of memory I'd somehow forgotten.

Neighbors and old friends of hers would pass by and smile softly when they saw me tending it.

"That tree," one woman said, "it's been here longer than I can remember. Your grandmother used to sit under it every evening with her tea and hum little songs. She always said it was planted with love."

Another nodded, "She said the tree was strong—like the women in your family. Not tall or showy, but sturdy, and always giving something back."

The tree was almost dying when I first inherited it—half its leaves brown, its soil dry and cracked. But with a little care, water, and whispered memories, it began to wake again. Slowly, it returned to life. Green returned to its limbs. Its leaves unfurled like tiny flags of hope.

And then something happened I hadn't expected.

As the old, dry leaves fell, I began to remember things—her recipes for stews and bread, the way she braided my hair and told me old stories from the "old country," the smell of her soap, the tune she'd hum while sewing, her sharp laugh when something truly delighted her. These weren't just memories—they were pieces of her, living again.

I found myself writing them down, page after page—whole notebooks full. Her wisdom was practical and poetic: how to stretch a meal to feed many, how to keep going when you're tired, how to stand up straight even when the world is heavy.

Some of the memories felt like secrets, like little roots under the soil that held everything together. They were quiet, strong truths that had helped her survive. And now they were mine.

I often sat by the tree with a cup of tea—just like she used to—reading what I had written. Sometimes I spoke aloud to it, wondering if somehow she was listening. Part of me believes she was.

I still don't know where to keep all these memories—how to carry them, or who they're really for. But I do know this: I will always remember her. I will always care for this tree.

And one day, maybe, I'll leave it for someone else.

Robert the Accidental Scientist of Arizona

In the mining community of Arizona, during the most demanding days of labor, surveying, and digging for precious minerals, men worked tirelessly to draw fruit from the land and build the capital needed to support trade—even with far-off Moscow, for reasons no one really remembered. The sun didn't just shine; it ruled the sky with an iron fist, beaming down like a furious overseer, barking orders to keep men sweating, swinging pickaxes, and dreaming of gold, fair wages, and ale strong enough to make even the driest throat sing.

It was the kind of scorching heat and relentless work that built muscles, forged resolve, and made legends. The search for water and resources pushed men farther and deeper into the earth, every swing of a shovel backed by desperation, hope, or stubborn pride.

I was there—entranced by the glint of the sun and the smell of herbs and incense that wafted from a nearby temple. There, amid the dry winds and distant chants, strong men toiled with tools crafted by expert hands—shovels and axes as faithful as old dogs. Some said even the village seer had blessed the steel.

“Yea!”

“Yea!”

“Yea!”

“Make way for the lazy and foolish who stand idle!”

“Today we labor! Tomorrow, we feast! The work shall yield fruit, and the fruit shall bring gold!”

The rhythm of the days followed that chant—sweat by day, songs by night. The men held good spirits, and their leader, a man named Robert, was admired for his cheerful grit and ability to yell inspiring things while standing on rocks.

Now, Robert wasn’t born a scientist. In fact, he wasn’t even particularly organized. But something about his presence—his knack for always picking the right dig spot or his uncanny ability to find a cool breeze—led the men to give him the honorary title: “The Scientist.” It was meant with affection and a touch of awe.

Under Robert’s direction and accidental wisdom, the men discovered a natural spring. It burst forth from the earth not with a whisper but with a joyous **splloosh**, spraying water like a divine geyser and stopping everyone mid-swing. The dust settled. Someone screamed. Another wept. One miner fainted into the puddle and came up grinning.

It was clean, cold, and entirely unexpected.

“This man,” one shouted, pointing to Robert, “isn’t just a leader. He’s a water-finding wizard!”

A second cried out, “A hydrological savant!”

And a third added, “I was just about to quit! But now, I think I’ll dig for the rest of my life!”

They carried Robert off the site like a victorious wrestler, cheering and throwing flower petals made of tortilla scraps. He was cleaned, clothed in ceremonial overalls, and told he’d now be heading up “all major regional resource discoveries and festival planning.”

Robert, ever humble, tried to explain: “I just hit it with a shovel.”

But the people wouldn’t hear of it. The Council of Miners (newly formed that afternoon) declared Robert the official Scientist of Water and Future Miracles. They assigned him assistants, wagons, and a new pickaxe engraved with the word “*Genius*.”

Soon, other villages came to see the spring. Local bakers offered him bread for advice. Children followed him, whispering, “He can smell water from a mile away!” One young lad swore Robert could talk to lizards and they told him where to dig.

Amid the growing excitement, Robert was tasked with leading new projects in surrounding regions. He oversaw the building of water systems, fair-trade markets, and—somehow—a goat cheese cooperative. He offered practical advice: “Don’t dig toward the hill unless you like rocks falling on your head,” and, “Always pack two sandwiches—one for morale.”

The men who had once worked beside him now looked on with pride. Robert, the once-ordinary laborer, had become a pioneer of water, work, and village-wide optimism.

It became an amusing yet touching spectacle: common folk gathered to watch a man from their own dusty commune—who used to trip over his own boots—stand confidently before trade delegates and irrigation planners. He didn’t use big words. He didn’t wear fancy hats. But he got things done.

And somehow, that made him the most trusted man in all the land.

Yes, it would amuse generations to come—how the community found peace, prosperity, and perfectly chilled drinking water because one man dug a little deeper, hit the right spot, and smiled modestly when called “The Scientist.”

The Lamp, the Legend, and the Guy Named Rich

by Jonathan Olvera

It was a hot summer. Not just “ice-cream-melting” hot. This was the kind of heat that made asphalt bubbles and pigeons file HR complaints.

It had been hot for so long that even the *desert* was sweating. So much, in fact, that natural springs had overflowed, filling ancient desert wells that hadn’t seen water since dinosaurs had Wi-Fi. Farmers rejoiced, planting seeds like hopeful

gamblers tossing dice. The promise of harvest was strong, and miraculously, things began to grow—melons, dates, even some weird tomato-cactus hybrid no one wanted to talk about.

I was in the middle of this sweaty paradise, wandering through the sun-scorched bazaar of a hill town known for its fruit, carpets, and very enthusiastic bartering. Everywhere I looked, locals spread out colorful blankets with trinkets, incense, hand-woven rugs, glittery shoes, and enough candles to reenact a medieval power outage.

And me? I was on a noble quest: **cheap stuff**.

I combed through baskets labeled “\$1 or best offer.” There were bronze goblets, rusted tins, and what looked suspiciously like a cursed monkey paw. That’s when I saw it—*the lamp*.

It was round, ornamental, and had that mystical, possibly overpriced look to it. It practically whispered, “Buy me and maybe your life gets weird.”

I fished out the last crumpled dollar I had, which I had been saving for a bottle of cold water. But hydration is temporary. Bargain genie lamps? That’s destiny.

Before the vendor could tell me it was decorative or warn me about potential magical consequences, I rubbed it.

Once.

Twice.

I paused, thinking, *Isn’t there always a third time?* And just as I rubbed it a final time...

WHOOSH!

A swirl of greenish-yellow smoke erupted. The air shimmered like heat over pavement, and a scrawny figure emerged. He looked like he’d just stumbled out of the world’s longest sandstorm and was late for brunch.

“One more time!” he barked dramatically, as if I were supposed to know the rules.

I shrugged and rubbed it again.

BOOM!

This time, a very different man appeared. Blue, muscly, glowing slightly. Kind of like if The Rock and a Smurf had a baby and gave it a customer service job.

“HOW are we doing, young man?” he said in a game-show-host voice. “Name’s Jeed. I’m your Genie.”

“Are... are you real?” I stammered.

“600 years of nap time and *this* is what wakes me,” he sighed. “Listen, I’ve got three wishes with your name on them. And I’m feeling generous, so let’s skip the paperwork.”

He didn’t wait for my answer.

“Wish One: A killer wardrobe!”

POW!

The ground trembled. Suddenly, I was surrounded by racks of designer clothing, mannequins, and confused tailors measuring my inseam.

“This isn’t what I meant by ‘killer wardrobe’!” I yelped. One of the suits looked like it was breathing.

“You’re welcome!” Jeed grinned.

“Wish Two: You wanna be rich? BAM! You’re Rich!”

BOW!

A lightning bolt of gold coins exploded around me. My ID changed. My name tag read: “Hello, my name is Rich.”

“Wait, my actual name is Rich now?” I asked, holding up a new driver’s license with my photo and the first name: “Rich.”

“Temporary side effect,” Jeed waved it off. “Next!”

“Wish Three: Wisdom.”

INSTANT.

Everything clicked. I suddenly understood quantum physics, the meaning of crop circles, and why socks disappear in the dryer. I even knew the exact number of licks to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop.

Jeed dusted off his hands. “There. Clothes, cash, enlightenment. All set.”

He floated lazily toward the lamp. “Now, don’t go calling me again unless it’s important. Like apocalyptic-important. I’ve got centuries of reality TV to catch up on.”

“Wait,” I said. “What about world peace? Ending poverty? A flying goat army?”

“Think carefully,” he said, his eyes suddenly serious. “Magic is unpredictable. And I’m on union break after this.”

Then he paused, looked over his shoulder, and said something I’d never forget:

“Be wise. Be humble. And seriously—no more lamp rubbing unless it’s a *big deal*.”

With a final sparkle, he disappeared into the lamp, leaving behind a faint scent of citrus, regret, and possibly paprika.

A Week Later...

I was indeed rich. Not just “buy a latte” rich. I mean “**accidentally bought a giraffe ranch on Etsy**” rich.

My wardrobe? Impeccable. I had suits that could talk back, a closet larger than my apartment, and shoes with their own air conditioning.

And the wisdom? That’s where things got tricky.

See, being wise sounds great until you suddenly understand *everything*. Like why cats stare at walls, or how every toddler knows your Wi-Fi password before you do.

I tried to ask the genie one more thing by rubbing the lamp. Nothing.

No puff. No Jeed. Just my reflection looking a little wiser and slightly more annoyed.

So... What Would I Wish for Next?

Honestly, I don’t know.

The genie may have been sarcastic, unpredictable, and oddly obsessed with fashion, but he was right. I had everything I thought I wanted—and more. But wisdom taught me that sometimes, what you *don’t* wish for matters more than what you do.

Also, killer wardrobes? Overrated. Especially when the suits try to walk themselves to brunch.

Epilogue: The Lamp Today

The lamp sits on my shelf now. Occasionally, it glows faintly during thunderstorms or when someone in the neighborhood makes an incredibly dumb decision.

I don’t rub it anymore.

Not unless there’s a world-ending problem.

Or I need directions to a really good shawarma place.

Whichever comes first.

The Trade Note Revolution: A Laborer's Chronicle of China's Forgotten Era

By Jonathan Olvera

Between 1930 and 1940, China was a different world than what we know today. It was a time suspended between traditions and the rising hum of industrial modernity—a strange and urgent stretch in history, where ideas bent space and time, and every stone laid in the earth was the echo of a changing world.

The shadows of past merchant wars and fractured banking houses lingered in the background. With the decline of the mercantile empires and after decades of silver crises, China was ripe for a transformation—not just politically or economically, but spiritually and structurally. A shift came with the slow but inevitable adoption of a new kind of promise: **the Trade Note**—an experimental financial tool that marked human labor, not just goods.

Our charge in those years was clear: to work for progress. And progress was not just a word—it was a set of tasks, plans, and outcomes we had to manifest with our hands. The banks, with all their skepticism and caution, began attempting to sell these new notes, converting trust into tender, hoping to integrate them into the larger economic arteries of the Chinese banking system.

But the work behind this vision? It was grueling. It was more than politics or economics—it was the labor of many, often unseen, often unpaid. Men and women alike were required to do more than just understand the system; they had to become the system. The jobs varied depending on the region and the need—some made medicinal or industrial powders, others collected stones from rivers and caves, some designed plans for new buildings and public roads. Still more worked to draft effective labor contracts and spent days rounding up enough willing workers to breathe life into a simple paper promise.

These weren't tasks from textbooks—they were the skeletal frames of an emerging economy built from sweat and uncertainty.

In those times, belief itself was currency. In China, the trust still leaned on solid coins—metal with heft and history. Tangible. Touchable. It was easier to collect taxes when you could weigh your payment in your palm. But Western thinkers, emboldened by the Industrial Revolution and Wall Street-style ambition, had other ideas. They proposed a new kind of abstraction: a Trade Note—a promise of value not yet born, backed by what *could be*, not just what *was*.

At first, the idea sounded like a gamble. Trade a paper note in exchange for food, water, or simple goods? A receipt for potential? But people, weary of wars and famines, were curious. The Trade Note wasn't about wealth—it was about human effort and potential. It said: *This paper represents my work. It carries the strength of my back and the cleverness of my tools. I offer this note because I have done something real, and something useful.*

It wasn't long before the idea caught on. Villages, then cities, started accepting these notes in return for ideas, architectural plans, land-use permissions, and cooperative contracts. It was a barter of the modern age, rooted in ancient instincts.

Banks began to adapt. Each note eventually became secured by a store of tangible resources. Gold, silver, salt, water, livestock—real goods held in bank vaults or

cooperative stores. A Trade Note wasn't just a promise; it became a placeholder for recovered and stored value. If a labor team unearthed ten tons of salt or completed an irrigation canal, their efforts would be recorded, and notes would be issued in parallel, creating a living index of labor, effort, and production.

This wasn't just economics. It was anthropology. It was storytelling in numbers. The note marked not only effort but the human capacity to organize—gathering workers, using tools, solving problems.

As time went on, even politics began to accept this idea. Imperial currency had begun to rot under the weight of inequality and suspicion. The Americas had already proven that unchecked imperial banking could lead to kidnapping, systemic injustice, and organized crime.

So, a new governance model emerged. Power began to shift from distant capitals to localized councils. These councils were responsible for:

- Determining the value of labor efforts,
- Governing local markets,
- Authorizing and securing trade notes based on real production.

It wasn't perfect. The new system couldn't eliminate crime or fraud entirely—those demons follow money like shadows follow fire. But what it did create was accountability. Honest labor groups were finally recognized. Their good work spoke through the notes they circulated. Communities began to rise—not through the gift of kings, but through the grit of citizens.

In time, the system proved its worth. Massive resource recoveries, especially in gold mining, salt farming, and cash crop production, helped stabilize regional economies. Notes backed by these efforts became more than paper—they were trust incarnate. Farmers exchanged notes for seed. Miners bought tools. Builders paid teams and drew up plans.

And thus, what began as an experiment became a movement. What started as desperation grew into dignity.

I remember those years not just as a worker but as a believer. We weren't just assembling materials—we were rebuilding faith in one another. The Trade Note didn't simply measure what we *had*; it measured what we *could do*, together. It was, in a strange and beautiful way, a spiritual currency—proof that progress is born from people, not paper.

Now, when I look at a coin or a bill, I don't see wealth—I see hands. I see shovels and calluses. I see plans on hand-drawn maps. I see children born under roofs built by trade.

And I remember that time—a stretch in history, quiet and overlooked—when the people of China bet on themselves.

Crowned by the Moon: A Vision in the Desert

By Jonathan Olvera

The moon hung solemnly over the rugged landscape, casting its silver gaze upon the ancient sands of the Southwest desert. It was not merely a moon to those who watched from beneath its glow—it was a sign. To the casual eye, it was just another night sky, but to those who truly looked, to those of faith and vision, the moon was a crown in the heavens, set with stars like diamonds in a celestial diadem.

Beneath its light, the inhabitants of this forgotten region carried on with their lives—some in quiet contemplation, others in labor, still others wandering beneath the moonlight seeking answers they could not yet articulate. They worked the hardened earth with bare hands, dug deep for water, traced their ancestors' paths between stone ruins and cactus fields. They searched for understanding not just in the soil, but in the order of the heavens.

In these earthly realms, where sun and heat dictated survival and movement, the moon marked something sacred: a rhythm, a guidepost, a mystery. Its waxing and waning reflected the cycles of life, of trial, of renewal. It was tied, somehow, to the decisions of men and the great unknowable will of the Creator who governed both light and darkness.

Those who were truly faithful saw it all clearly. The moon was not just an object but a **symbol**—a beacon over the temples and caravans, over humble homes and vast unclaimed lands. It marked migration, both physical and spiritual, leading people through deserts not just of sand, but of soul.

The Creator—whose name is known by many but truly understood by few—was the author of it all. He shaped the realms of time, the rising and setting of the sun, the glimmer of stars, the hum of wind through stone. His hand, invisible yet omnipresent, choreographed the turning of seasons, the blooming of desert flowers, and the miracle of human consciousness.

It was a humbling thought, one that made men and women kneel beneath the stars in prayer or reflection. How could we comprehend a mind more powerful than ten thousand of our own? A mind that orchestrates justice while permitting mystery. A power that allows both beauty and suffering in the same day.

The people in the desert knew this mystery, even if they could not name it. They saw His work in the balance of the world. They believed that to **govern the nature of men** was not a human right, but a **divine responsibility**—and they left such power to the heavens.

Yet, not all were willing to see. Some turned away. Others followed strange paths, science bent into shadows—devil worship, hollow rituals, mocking what they could not understand. They danced in the illusion of control, seeking meaning in darkness instead of light. It was a tragedy, yet foretold. Not all would choose faith.

But to those who remained on the path—who sought answers in prayer, in soil, in stars—revelation came gently. The Creator’s design was not hidden. It was stitched into the fabric of life: in the way cactus blooms after drought, how fire follows lightning, how birth follows pain.

The stars above were not just light; they were signals. The moon was not just a mirror of the sun; it was a timekeeper. Each element—earth, air, water, flame—acted under divine authority, not random chance. Every movement served a purpose.

Some of the greatest mysteries had the simplest answers. Why do the stars shine so brightly? Because the Creator made it so. Why does life thrive even in the harshest places? Because it is His will that beauty should exist even where it seems impossible. These truths weren’t written in stone, but in experience—in watching, in waiting, in feeling.

To live was to participate in this celestial puzzle. Each person a piece, each moment a clue. Life wasn’t meant to be fully solved, but deeply observed. The Creator did not hide Himself; He revealed Himself through what He made. The earth was His canvas, the stars His poetry.

Even death, feared and whispered about, was not the end. The promise of life—true life—came not in avoiding mortality, but in understanding it as part of a larger rhythm. Science, medicine, healing—these were gifts, yes. But they were not ours alone. They were sparks, lent from the stars, from the sun, from the Creator’s own hand. And they were temporary. What lasts is the soul.

The faithful ones knew that the Creator had placed jewels throughout nature—not just literal gems, but metaphors: flowers that bloom only at night, water hidden beneath dry rock, wind that speaks in the voice of trees. These decorations weren’t accidents. They were signs. They were messages from angels, from justice-bearers who worked quietly in the name of the Most High.

And so, the desert was not barren—it was a temple. The people were not lost—they were pilgrims. And the moon above? It was not just a satellite; it was a crown. A symbol that we, in our humble attempts at understanding, might one day glimpse the full glory of what governs us.

In the end, the greatest truth is this: the world is full of divine fingerprints. You need only pause, lift your head, and look to the sky.

For there hangs the moon—**crowned and glowing**—watching over the faithful in the desert, marking their steps as they walk the path not of certainty, but of belief.

Sugar Highs and Factory Skies: A Day with Uncle Wonka

By Jonathan Olvera

I woke up to a sweltering morning, the sun already blazing in the sky. Its fiery rays hit me directly on the forehead, making me squint as sweat trickled down my face, following the rhythm of each heartbeat until it reached my chin. The heat was oppressive, but I knew that the day ahead would be full of excitement, so I pushed the discomfort aside.

I was ready to work.

The first thing I did was sit up in bed, stretching my arms and yawning. I needed water, and I needed it fast. I grabbed the cup from the bedside table and drank it quickly, savoring the coolness as it slid down my throat. After I had finished, I took a moment to think. The boots my uncle had gathered for me at the second-hand market were in the corner of the room. I pulled them on, lacing them tightly and preparing myself for another long day of work.

Uncle William Wonka would be waiting for me at the factory down the street. The thought of him always brought a grin to my face. There was something about the factory that was so magical, so full of life and surprises, that I couldn't wait to get there each morning.

Excitedly, I dashed out the door, nearly tripping over the uneven cobblestones as I made my way toward the grand factory. The world seemed to blur around me as I ran, all the obstacles in my path shrinking in my excitement to see my uncle.

When I reached the base of the cement platform where the factory stood, I slowed down to catch my breath. The towering gates of the factory gleamed in the sunlight, with intricate steelwork woven into the design of the building, giving it an industrial yet almost otherworldly appearance. It was 1869, and the factory was about to embark on a new era of sweet production. The factory was a symbol of progress—new machines, new ideas, and endless possibilities.

As I approached, I could already hear the hum of the machines inside, their gears and cogs turning in perfect synchrony. The teeth on the powder machines were sharp and ready to fluff sugar into delicate, airy crystals. The plant-eater, as we liked to call it, was ready to wind the seeds and nuts that would become the base for our candies. There was an energy in the air, a buzzing excitement that matched my own.

But beyond all the machinery and candy-making, what I loved most about the factory was the laughter. Uncle William had a way of making even the most tedious tasks feel like fun. He always had a joke ready to lighten the mood, no matter how hard we were working.

“What’s the best way to enjoy a candy-filled day?” he asked, his eyes twinkling as he looked at me, his hands busy with a contraption in front of him.

“I know the answer!” I replied eagerly. “With a sugar high and a smile!”

Uncle William chuckled, nodding in approval. “Exactly! That’s the key to a happy day.”

But of course, not every day at the factory was filled with candy-making and jokes. There were days when we spent hours holed up in a room, pouring over chalkboards filled with equations, studying the properties of sugar circles and the way different colors would react when mixed with our secret ingredients. Those days could be long and tedious, and at times, I found my mind wandering.

Just when I thought I might lose focus, Uncle William would interrupt the monotony with a joke.

“Why did the lollipop end up in the orchestra?” he asked, looking up from his notes with a grin on his face.

I looked at him, confused. “I’m not too sure,” I admitted.

Uncle William beamed. “It was the stick player!”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it. That was the magic of the factory: no matter how serious the work got, there was always room for a little laughter.

As we worked, I began to realize how much responsibility rested on our shoulders. Soda and sugars had to be perfected, every formula had to be double-checked, and we had to ensure that the factory was running smoothly. Uncle William often said that the key to creating the perfect candy was balance—balance between sweetness and sourness, between texture and taste. It was a delicate science, and we had to get it right.

We weren’t alone in our efforts. The Oompa-Loompas, the factory’s secret workers, were always there to help, their quick hands and sharp minds ensuring that everything ran efficiently. They were experts in their craft, and their knowledge of candy-making was second to none. Sometimes, I would catch glimpses of them through the glass windows of the classroom, working away in the factory below, their movements swift and purposeful.

It was on one of these long days, with hours of work stretching ahead of us, that Uncle William shared one last joke before we dove back into the candy-making process.

“What did the jellybean say to the chocolate bar?” he asked, a mischievous grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

I looked at him, waiting for the punchline.

The Oompa-Loompa on the other side of the glass window, who had been listening in, piped up with the answer before I could even open my mouth. “You’re looking pretty sweet today, but I’ve got the jelly on you!”

We all laughed at the joke, the lighthearted moment breaking up the tension of the day. It was these small moments of joy that made the hard work bearable and kept me coming back to the factory day after day.

Now, as I sit here thinking about all the laughter and effort that goes into creating the perfect candy, I realize that there’s more to this place than just the sweets. It’s about the people—the ones who work tirelessly to create something magical, and the ones who bring a little light into the darkest of moments.

Before I go back to work, I have one last joke to share with the readers of *A Collection of Short Stories #2*:

“What’s Wonka’s favorite exercise?”

“Candy-lifting! It’s sweet for the muscles!”

And with that, I return to my post, ready to create more magic—one candy at a time.

The Temple Within Me

by Jonathan Olvera

Before the stones were lifted, before my knees touched the ground, I came to understand this truth: labor is a sacred language. To shape the world is to speak with it. I did not arrive in strength—I arrived in surrender. I was sent to learn, not to lead. To be shaped, not to shape.

It was not weakness to kneel. It was reverence. And through reverence, I came to know what it meant to become more than a man. I became a vessel. I became a builder of something greater than myself.

The mist clouded my eyes, but not my purpose. In humility, I found the path. In obedience, I found my voice. And in service, I found my place among the stones of the sacred.

Looking through the mist obstructing my vision, I began to understand why I had been sent here. The air was thick, the path uncertain. Bit uneasy on my feet, I took slow, deliberate steps. I knew this work was out of my control—out of any man's control, truly.

But it had to be done.

One time. One calling.

And I was sent to do the work—in the name of my father.

The ground was not soft. Blocks of ancient rock lay scattered across the land, some cracked open, as if asking to be seeded—to be touched, transformed. I didn't know how at first. I had to learn. And it was not easy to learn.

With my innocence—with a guiltless conscience—I struggled to understand how to serve a man, a man above all others. They called him the *teacher of teachers*.

He was not cruel, but he was exacting. His words were few, his silence heavy. Every command he gave was more than instruction—it was revelation. Yet it became difficult for me, not because the work was hard, but because I didn't know who I was. I didn't know where I came from.

And yet, maybe that wasn't what mattered.

It's not always important to know where you come from.

But it *is* important to be compatible with where you're going.
It is important to learn.

To listen to the *teacher of teachers* was a difficult passage. There was no comfort, no distraction. I learned to use my nails, to kneel on stone, to bow my head in the dirt, and to pray.

It was not fun. It was not glorious. But it was sacred.

I wish to be grateful.
I wish to fill the cup with the chosen sacrifice.
I wish to be poured out in purpose.

Though the paths of the Temple were clean and uniform, marked with symmetrical lines and great pillars, it was not these that spoke to me. It was the voice.

"Young man, assist me in building this Temple. For more than you and me, there will be others."

And then he added, "That is nature."

It was painful—to set myself aside. To think differently. I was no longer just a person. I had become something else. I was a believer in something greater than humanity.

It was my belief in the *light of the promise*—in the Creator of this Temple—that gave me strength. I had been called to this path. And one day, without prompt, I kneeled again, bowed my head deeper, and knew:

The sky, bright and endless, called me upward. The natural scene stretched for miles—prairies, wild hills, flowering grains. I could see creation, and within it, I saw the *light of God* raining down upon me.

I was exactly where I needed to be.

"Guide my hands, my God," I whispered.

"God, hear me!" I asked aloud.

"I must build your Temple!"
"The Lord's grace be upon me!"
"The mercy of God be upon me!"

"It is your work!" the teacher bellowed.

And I replied, shouting now, eyes wide with wonder:

"I can see! I can see!"
"God be with me!"

I rose to my feet.

Around me, there were abundant gifts—plants of many species, birds with feathers I had never seen, flowers from far lands. I stepped forward with faith, gazing beyond the Temple to endless lands of fruit and grain.

I was amazed.

Who else could do this for me?

*Is this the burden you placed on me, my God?
To behold your work and continue in my nature?*

"Teacher," I said, my voice shaking with hope, "I can do this."

He turned, smiling. "I know you can," he said. "You may continue."

There had been nothing in my young life more exciting than to watch the sunlight break through darkness. Not just once, but every single day. It came like a reminder: that I was alive, that I was chosen, that my work mattered.

I was aware of my God.
I was aware of the Temple.
I was aware of my place in this plan.

So I began again—this time with intention. Not only to obey, not only to serve, but to create in the name of the Creator. I walked through fields and prairies not as a wanderer, but as a witness. I had many things to do.

I lifted stones and placed them with care. I taught others what little I had learned. I prayed not for strength, but for faith.

Because faith, I learned, is what keeps you moving when strength gives out.

And now I see—truly see.

To labor in the name of the divine is not to lose yourself. It is to find the part of you that was waiting to awaken. The one that does not chase glory, but offers it up. The one that kneels not in shame, but in surrender.

*I am not finished.
This Temple may never be finished.
But each stone, each field, each prayer—I know now—it becomes part of something eternal.*

This is the Temple within me.

The Sojourner of Ash and Fire

By Jonathan Olvera

The work was harsh.

There were days when the sun sat too long in the sky, like a judgment refusing to pass. The desert didn't just burn—it branded. Every grain of sand carried heat, every breath carried thirst. The world, in its busyness and beauty, seemed to pass around this forgotten place—a small hell of the American Southwest, home to reptiles, wandering men, and beasts who had long since learned how to live without mercy.

I was born into this land, not by accident, but by inheritance.

There were laws here—unwritten but understood. Game and fairness were currency. A man's honor was judged by how he played both. We lived by what we were given and survived by what we could barter from the earth. In the local sphere of habitation, our identities were shaped by survival, our stories passed not in books, but in blood and memory.

I remember the difficulty well. Science, in this place, was no luxury—it was survival. The hard questions—where to find water, how to cultivate life in ash, how to trade knowledge for bread—were solved not in laboratories, but out in the open, beneath an unforgiving sky.

When the buffalo disappeared, others came—elephants from far lands, camels with eyes like ancient prophets. They were introduced not for wonder, but for necessity. We learned from them. We mimicked their endurance, their stillness, their ability to find water where none seemed to exist.

The world was changing, and so was the desert. Roads appeared—Roman in their design, winding and connecting the once-isolated communities. Governors came, too—men in suits and soldiers in boots. They didn't speak our tongue, but they tried to tame our dust. Their maps didn't always match the land, but they paved it anyway.

I lived among many in this strange new order, and we did our best to get along. We wrote. We learned. We taught one another how to make a life from nothing. In that process, I found purpose.

Most days, I walked beneath the boiling sky, searching for water. With blistered hands, I scraped at the earth's crust, hoping to find the cool promise buried beneath. One day, I did. I found a hidden pocket of water—small, precious, and real. That discovery lit something inside me. I began to plan. This resource had value. It had to be documented, shared, reported. Even in the wilderness, structure must follow discovery.

The law was Roman now. I understood that. I respected it.

And yet, in the silence of the desert, my past whispered to me.

I remembered Egypt—not the Egypt of maps, but the one of memory. I had served there once, in a past life perhaps. In Saudi Arabia, too. I was a servant to my family in Patrís and Capernaum, watching over children, attending to the needs of my uncle, a man of power and shame. He drank too much. His name was Herod. And those who followed him—the Pharisees—they wore their religion like a crown but used it as a whip.

Even then, I had escaped chains, not by strength, but by love. I found freedom in tending to others, in being useful, in not being cruel.

But when blood ran in the streets of Spanish Egypt, I fled.

I crossed land after land—Thess, Africa, Arabia—each more inhospitable than the last. And when I could run no more, I prayed. Not with words, but with my footsteps. And God answered. He sent Elijah—not a myth, but a presence. And in his chariot of fire, I crossed the sea, again and again. Sometimes to America. Sometimes back to the old lands.

In one such journey, I found my family again—in a jungle thick with vines and voices. The chariot found them, and I found peace, if only for a moment.

Now I am here once more, in the land of ash and fire. Arizona, they call it. A name born from wind and stone. The sky is no kinder here, but I am older now. Wiser. My story continues.

I write it so the children will remember. So the animals will know they were not forgotten. So the governors and the priests and the prophets might pause long enough to hear the truth that grows from this scorched soil.

That even in the harshest places, God walks with the sojourner.

The desert taught me many things. It taught me silence, and it taught me survival. But above all, it taught me to listen—not just with my ears, but with my spirit.

There were days when the wind whispered names I had long forgotten. Days when the rocks seemed to pulse with ancient rhythms, and I remembered the voices of those who walked this world before us—prophets, wanderers, servants, kings.

One night, as the sky wept ash and stars, I sat beside a shallow pit I had dug for water. The moon was pale and full, and the silence around me was deeper than usual, as if the desert itself were waiting. I had not spoken aloud in days. Yet, as I looked to the heavens, I said quietly, “Lord, I am here. Still. Listening.”

And I saw a flame—distant at first. Then it grew, not wild but purposeful. It did not consume the earth, but revealed it. A chariot approached, forged in fire, yet floating like a feather across the sand. Riding it was Elijah, his hair wind-swept, his eyes alive with memory and command.

He stepped down, and for a moment I was not in Arizona. I was in no land I could name—perhaps a place between heaven and earth, where time bowed its head and let the eternal pass through.

“Elijah,” I whispered, “I thought your work was finished.”

He smiled. “For some, the journey ends. For others, it begins again.”

I stood, unsure of my place. “Why me?”

“Because you remembered,” he said. “And because you ask questions when others seek comfort. You scratched at the ash when others surrendered to thirst.”

I followed him to the chariot. Inside, there was no fire, only warmth. It moved not with wheels, but with will. And suddenly, we were soaring above the desert, the land unrolling beneath us like an ancient scroll.

We passed over Egypt—golden and bloodstained. Over Arabia, where the wind carried prayers older than scripture. Over Spain, where the empire had risen and fallen again and again. Each place whispered my name, as if my soul had left echoes behind on every road I’d ever walked.

Then we descended—slowly, reverently—into a green so thick it swallowed sound. The jungle. Somewhere deep in Africa or the heart of memory. There, in the shadows of tall trees and tangled vines, I saw them—my family.

Not just those of flesh and blood, but those of spirit. The ones who had traveled through fire, who had crossed the sea with Moses, who had slept under stars with Abraham, who had danced before the LORD with David.

I wept, because I was known.

One child ran to me and placed a stone in my hand. It was warm and etched with symbols I did not recognize. “For the road back,” she said. “So you don’t forget.”

I turned to Elijah. “Why show me this?”

He looked to the sky, which had begun to turn gold at the edges. “Because you must go back, Jonathan. The desert still burns. But now, you burn too—with memory, with story, with truth. Go, and tell them.”

And just like that, the chariot returned me to the land of ash. The Arizona wind howled again. The fire was gone. But the warmth remained.

I returned to the work of water. But now I knew it wasn’t just about quenching thirst—it was about *remembering*. The desert was not empty. It was a library, if you knew where to read. Every grain of sand held history. Every lizard knew the wisdom of stillness. Every thorn had a scripture etched in silence.

I began to write again. Not just for myself, but for the others—those still searching for meaning in the dust.

Some came to me, asking why I dug where nothing seemed to grow.

I told them: “Because I believe something holy still waits beneath our suffering.”

Others laughed.

But a few stayed. They listened. They helped.

We built small shelters out of stone and patience. We carved names into the ground, not to mark graves, but to declare survival.

One day, I met a boy with skin the color of deep coffee and eyes like the sky before dawn. He sat beside my fire and said nothing. After a while, he held out a scroll—old, brittle, and written in a dialect I had never seen before.

“What is this?” I asked.

He pointed to the horizon. “It’s where we’re going.”

And I understood. This story was not finished.

If you find yourself in a dry place, do not curse the dust. Sit with it. Listen to it. Dig deep, not just into the earth, but into yourself.

The fire you need may not fall from the sky.

It may already be inside you, waiting to rise.

In the Name of the Earth and the Lord

By Jonathan Olvera

Before I shaped the land, I had to shape myself.

They say labor is the burden of the lowly, the task of those beneath power. But I have found that in work—honest, unforced work—there is more peace than in command. There is more wisdom in the sweat of the brow than in the sharpness of a tongue.

To place one's hands in the soil is not to lower oneself, but to rise into something eternal. The earth remembers. The seeds remember. And perhaps the gods do too.

I have learned to be gentle—not as weakness, but as strength softened by choice. The harsh voices of authority once shaped me with fear, but I chose not to carry their anger. I listened to nature instead. I watched how she bends without breaking, how she gives even when stripped. She taught me patience. She taught me to serve without shame.

So I do not rebel against the order of things. I do not raise a sword against law. But I have chosen a different path—one that neither defies nor submits, but transforms.

My labor is not an offering to men. It is a conversation with the divine. In the quiet spaces between each breath, each motion of the hand, I speak my faith—not in words, but in work.

This is how I came to carve a path—not for conquest, but for understanding.

The time in his long-known home was pleasing to a new count—a count of heads. The village had grown, quietly at first, then quickly, like a field of grain catching wind. It was not often that a small settlement gave birth in such deliberate order, but order had become necessity. Life had begun to mimic design. Science, once myth and miracle, had grown into method. The labor of men, though hard, had become guided by thought, not just force. And nature—generous as ever—was not resisting. It was listening.

The time was named *Rome*. And the earth itself seemed to echo the name.

Paths had begun to stretch like veins from the heart of the settlement. Dirt pressed flat by the traffick of feet, hooves, carts. What began as simple tracks grew into roads, and roads into arteries of trade and travel. Distant lands proved similar truths: that grain fed power, and power longed for more.

“They look the same as I,” the young plebeian often thought as he watched new faces pass through the village. He saw strangers from the north, sun-darkened men from the south, women adorned in cloths dyed with distant color. A brotherhood of shape, even amid difference. He admired them—and sometimes feared them. The world was growing larger. And he was still standing in a small field.

There was much slavery, and with it, the weight of empire. Some served by force, others by hunger. But to the young man, something else stirred—a desire not to conquer, but to *cultivate*. He longed not to dominate nature, but to invite it into conversation. To give shape to chaos. The people consumed the land’s abundance, but he wanted to feed it in return.

The weather had been kind. Seasons predictable, rains generous. The pace of construction quickened—walls, aqueducts, temples. Trade brought tools, ideas, even gods. Practice became profession. The gods became stories—but not for him. His belief remained personal, burning like a quiet flame.

“I am excited,” he said to himself one morning, standing at the edge of a neglected plot of land just outside the village. Here, grass stood waist-high and tangled. A faint path ran through it—carved by deer, foxes, the occasional shepherd. It was not much, but it was something.

He knelt, fingers brushing the earth. “I have a need to control this here,” he whispered. “Not to possess—but to know it.”

He stood, inhaling deeply. “I can learn this.”

He looked down at the dirt. “Just look at the ground, and its untamed nature...” Then he smiled, embarrassed by his own voice. Still, he spoke again—louder this time.

“Would you like to work for me?”

He paused. The wind rustled the tall grass.

"I have a choice today. And the choice is in my faith. It is in my belief. I know I can learn and make plentiful for myself."

He placed a hand over his chest. "In this service, my Lord, I know I can honor my word."

The moment was not grand. No thunder rolled. No divine light split the sky. But something subtle shifted—a quiet certainty in his bones.

"I believe that you know me," he said softly. "And you will allow me to do this work in your name."

The next day, he began.

He borrowed tools—simple ones. A spade, a hoe, a rusty sickle. The first few days, he cleared the path, removing rocks and stubborn roots. Then he marked rows with twine. His hands bled. His back ached. But his spirit sang.

Each morning, he offered a brief prayer—not in temple, but in field. "Let my labor be good. Let my work become word."

Others noticed. Some mocked him. "The gods don't live in dirt," an older man said, spitting near the path. Others were kinder. "You're wasting good time, boy," a woman chided. "Come build walls with us—we pay in coin."

He nodded politely. But he stayed.

Seasons passed.

He planted flax and lentils. Then barley. Then wheat. The yield was small at first. But it grew. And with it, so did he.

He built a small shelter nearby—nothing more than woven reeds and wood. But it gave him rest. At night he listened to the wind and wrote in a small wax tablet, not with elegance but with honesty. He recorded the movement of stars, the flight of birds, the scent of soil before rain.

In time, children came to watch him. He showed them how seeds slept in soil, and how water coaxed them to wake. He taught them how to read the land—not just maps, but *meaning*.

One day, a traveler paused by his field. The man was clothed finely, a scholar from the city. He studied the rows and asked, "Is this your land?"

The young man nodded. "It is not mine in ownership. But it is mine in service."

The scholar smiled. "You've shaped it well."

"It shaped me first," he replied.

The scholar stayed for hours, asking questions, taking notes. Before leaving, he offered a scroll of parchment.

"Your field is mentioned now, in the city's record. They're calling it *the student's garden*. I hope you don't mind."

The young man blinked, unsure how to answer. "I never thought it would matter."

"It matters," the scholar said. "A great many things start in silence."

As the man walked away, the plebeian turned back to the field. Wind passed through it like a whispered prayer. He closed his eyes.

He did not feel small anymore. The village was still there. So was the empire, the slaves, the distant wars. But he had carved a path—his own.

And in the soft soil beneath his feet, he had placed something lasting.

Not stone.
Not gold.
But faith.

Now I understand.

The strength of a man is not in how he commands others, nor in how he resists the will of the world, but in how he listens—deeply, patiently—to what life asks of him.

The path I carved did not lead to glory, but to grounding. The field did not shout my name to the heavens, but it answered me. In every root that took hold, in every sprout that braved the light, I saw a reflection of my own hope.

I once thought submission was defeat—but I see now, to bow to the rhythms of nature, to walk humbly in service of something greater, is to be free. Gentleness is not silence. It is strength without cruelty. It is power without the need to dominate.

The world will still build empires. Stone will still rise, and names will be etched into walls. But I will not need a statue to remember what I did here.

*The soil remembers.
The wind remembers.
And I remember who I became.*

*I am no longer only a plebeian.
I am a keeper of quiet faith,
A servant of the living earth,
And a maker of peace in a world of commands.*

War of the Green Stone

By Jonathan Olvera

Long before human civilizations, the Forest Realm flourished under the watchful rule of Xael, a strict yet wise sorcerer whose power stemmed from a mystical green stone. However, his rigid leadership caused unrest, paving the way for Rondul, a seductive vampire, to rise. Promising forbidden power through blood rituals, Rondul lured away many of Xael's followers, establishing a rival cult.

Troubled by the corruption spreading through his lands, Xael sought guidance from Fucchehi, an ancient cosmic wizard who governed balance. Granted permission to act, Xael awakened the forest's magical defenders. Rondul, sensing conflict, prepared for war, and Fucchehi arrived silently as a neutral force, ready to restore harmony if chaos prevailed.

A fierce battle erupted, culminating in Rondul destroying Xael's green stone. But instead of victory, the broken gem unleashed uncontrollable natural power that destroyed both armies. In the aftermath, Rondul was imprisoned beneath the forest, Xael disappeared into legend, and Fucchehi retreated—silent, watching for imbalance to return.

In an age before the nations of men rose, the Forest Realm thrived under the stewardship of Xael, the Green Sorcerer. He carried a staff crowned with a glowing emerald stone—an artifact of life itself, bound by ancient enchantment to every root, leaf, and creature beneath his domain. Xael was just and wise, but stern. He

demanded discipline and reverence for the forest, which caused unrest among his people.

Far beyond the outermost glades, another figure emerged—**Rondul**, a vampire cloaked in a crimson cape. Though cursed with immortality, Rondul possessed a charisma and cunning few could resist. He lured disillusioned workers from the forest realm and taught them blood rituals, compelling them to make sacrifices—first of animals, then of men. These rites fed a growing power, and Rondul's followers began building temples of blood-soaked stone.

Xael, grieved and enraged by the betrayal of his people, sought counsel in a distant, hidden dimension: the **Realm of Gentle Humans**. There, in a place beyond time, lived **Fucchegi**, an invisible wizard draped in celestial blue. His cone-shaped hat shimmered with runes older than language. Fucchegi governed planetary forces, a silent force of order.

Xael pleaded for permission to unleash an enchantment—to prepare the forest for war. Fucchegi listened, then asked plainly:

"What is it you fear will happen if you do not act?"

Xael replied:

"The forest will burn, the stone will break, and life will bow to blood."

Fucchegi granted Xael permission to awaken the **Verdant Legions**—ancient sentinels of bark and root. Enchanted wolves, treants, and forest spirits stirred to life. Meanwhile, Rondul sensed the shift. The skies grew thick with fog. His temples pulsed with energy. He knew: war was coming.

As Xael's army approached, Rondul laughed from his obsidian throne. "Let him come. I will drink the soul from that stone."

What neither sorcerer knew was that Fucchegi had also arrived—not as an ally, but as the arbiter. If the planet tilted too far toward blood or stone, he would restore balance—by fire if necessary.

The **Battle of the Stone Vale** erupted at dusk. Tree warriors clashed with blood cultists. Lightning split the sky as Xael cast sigils of protection, while Rondul soared above the fray, tearing through enemies like wind through grass.

At the climax, Rondul struck down Xael's staff, shattering the green stone. But from the shards, life burst forth—a surge of wild nature uncontrollable even by Xael himself. The forest rebelled, consuming both armies in a storm of vine and flame.

Fucchegi hovered above, unseen but vigilant. With a whisper, he stilled the winds and sealed the battlefield in enchantment.

Rondul, broken but unkillable, was imprisoned beneath the roots of the ancient forest. Xael, his magic spent, vanished into the mist, his spirit one with the woods. And Fucchegi? He returned to his invisible realm, watching, waiting for the balance to tip once again.

Though the battle ended in devastation, the true forces at play—life, blood, and balance—endured. Rondul was buried deep within the earth, forever cursed to remain, while Xael’s essence became part of the forest he once ruled. High above, Fucchegi resumed his quiet vigil, ready to act when the scales of the world again began to tip.

Mothers Who Stood in the Gap

By Jonathan Olvera

The year was 2024.

The world was shifting—politically, spiritually, and culturally. The laws had changed, and so had the people. A Roman who had once fought for an empire now labored in faith, his hands no longer bound by the sword but dedicated to rebuilding a land in transition.

It was an age of division.

Two names stood at the center of the struggle: the Nephites and the Romans. Yet the battle wasn’t only for power or land—it was for meaning. For identity. For the soul of a people. The names had changed, but the tension was ancient: the conflict between pride and peace, between self-interest and sacred duty.

Each day, the moon rose and the sun followed—unchanging, faithful, like the rhythm of Scripture. And in that rhythm stood the servants of God. They worked. They worshiped. They prayed.

And among them were the **mothers**, the silent strength beneath the noise of politics and war.

They were not seated in courts or councils. They did not wear armor or deliver decrees. But they **stood in the gap**—unshaken, unmoved, and unwilling to let the next generation forget who they were or whom they belonged to.

They washed their feet.
They prepared meals.
They whispered bedtime blessings over sons and daughters.
They anointed doorposts with oil and guarded their homes with the sword of prayer.

These women carried the faith not in parchment, but in practice.
Not in volume, but in vision.
Their hands wore the marks of labor, and their hearts bore the burden of generations.

The people thanked God for the harvest, but it was the mothers who had planted the seeds in dry seasons. They held onto hope when justice seemed far off and conflict never-ending. In the quiet hours of the morning, they interceded for their children. In the long nights, they worshiped when no one else was watching.

And still, evil moved through the land.
Injustice did not sleep.
Roman laws favored some and crushed others. Battles raged, and many were lost. A judge was appointed to bring order—but no legal decree could heal what war had broken.

Still, the mothers remained.
They were the storytellers, the keepers of the covenant.
While men debated politics and land rights, **the women remembered the promises of God.** They told the truth to their children. They reminded them of miracles in the wilderness, of bread from heaven, of the God who never forgot His people.

And slowly, something shifted.
New believers rose up—men and women who had once resisted the truth now bowed before it. They saw that the Lord was not only just but good. They desired peace. They wanted to build again.

And when the courts signed new decrees, when trade routes reopened and homes were rebuilt, the credit belonged not only to leaders or warriors—but to the **mothers who had refused to give up.**

They were the bridge between ruin and restoration.
They were the memory-keepers.
They were the prayer-warriors who labored without rest.

Their children would one day call them blessed.
Not because they were perfect—but because they were present.
Because they stood in the space between despair and deliverance and refused to be moved.

The harvest was sown in tears,
but it was reaped in praise.

Because in every generation, there are **mothers who stand in the gap**.
And by their faith, nations are preserved.

The Light Upon the Rock

by Annete Hale

Six hundred under the sun, a single stone rose from the ocean floor. Firm and immovable, it pierced the tide like the spine of the Earth itself. The waters churned around it, breaking into foaming crescents that hissed and retreated, only to return again. Titans of current and wave bowed to its presence, and the sun bore down on it daily, burning it with radiant purpose.

It was here, on this enduring rock, that a new story began.

The Architects of Time—those early, restless minds—scouted the coastlines not for conquest, but for nourishment, health, and continuity. They were seekers, not rulers, and when they found the rock, they found more than just stone. The land beyond the waves gave back what it had taken long ago: glimmering truths, forgotten messages, and dazzling secrets buried in sand and tide.

Humans came with tools, minds sharpened by hunger and hope. They worked the shores, harvesting grain from the beaches, molding sea-foul into labor forms—

living machines of fishbone and coral. They toiled in salt and sun, gathering from the rocks not only sustenance but mystery.

Soon, something changed.

The rock began to give them more than food. Deep in tide-sifted pools and under layers of sand hardened like ancient bark, they found shells with strange symmetries, gems that flickered in the moonlight, and living coral that pulsed like veins. The beach was no longer just a place to work—it became a place of meaning, where nature spoke in color and curve, whispering symbols from beneath the waves.

With each discovery came revelation. The items sparkled, yes, but they also *spoke*. A complicated message shimmered through their structure—a map, a memory, perhaps even a warning. Progress followed awe. What had begun as harvest became expedition. What had been a job became a rite.

Soon it became a daily errand—walk the rocky perimeter, gaze into the surf, bring back something radiant. Coral that burned like fire. Stones clear as air. Pearls with tiny, perfect maps of the constellations etched inside. They built a small platform on the rock, raised just above the waterline, a place to watch and wait.

Life along the coast flourished. The catch was constant, the waters generous in both salt and fresh, giving rise to a diversity unknown inland. The people of the coast became distinct, marked not only by their ocean-bred health but by how they viewed the world—with openness, curiosity, and reverence for nature’s riddles.

Their inland cousins lived under older gods, atop wooded hills and within stone-ringed valleys. They measured their worth in timber and beast, in long hunts and cold winters. But the coast had fish, sun, salt, and fire. They had shells that sang when the wind passed through them, and stones that could cut light in half.

Trade was inevitable.

Lumber for shells. Iron for fish. Stone for salt. As goods passed hands, so did ideas. The inland tribes marveled at the coast’s ornamentations—the sea-polished pearls, the living jewelry, the stories carved in sand-glass. The coastal tribes desired tools, metals, and the endless firewood from inland forests.

And in this tide of commerce, human nature did what it always does—it played. It danced. It seduced and promised and bet and boasted. Men traded meat for favors, fish for gold, knowledge for space. Villages expanded. Roads were cut. Markets emerged.

One man, a builder of some renown, turned his skills toward the sea.

He had once felled trees for warmth, but now he carved stone for light. The trade had changed him. Where others sought wealth, he sought understanding. What was it the sea was telling them? Why did the shells whisper when held close to the ear? Why did some stones shimmer only during storms?

He planned to answer the question by ascending the Rock.

He rallied others—stonemasons, dreamers, traders—and together they built a spiral staircase up the ancient stone. It wrapped around the spine of the rock like ivy, carved with the glyphs found on beach glass and sun-baked pearls. Each step was a symbol. Each symbol, a question.

At the summit, they constructed a platform—small, circular, no larger than a fire pit. In its center they placed a beacon, a bowl of polished coral and volcanic stone. They fed it oil from fish and light from the sun. It burned low at first, no more than a candle's flicker.

But as the wind rose and the tide pulled away, the flame surged.

They called it *The Watch*. It was a signal, a guide, a promise. At night, it cast its shimmer across the dark waters. The light danced on the waves, playing among the black crests like a spirit.

And they waited.

Not for ships—those did not exist yet. Not for gods—those they had already met. No, they waited for an answer. For something to shimmer back. To return the gaze.

The idea of a boat had not yet been born. It would be generations before anyone set sail. But the light came first. And those who kindled it passed down one truth, etched in stone and salt:

“Let the light never die.”

For it was not flame alone that they tended. It was the belief that the ocean held more, that the shore was just the edge of something vast and unfinished. The rock in the sea was their question to the world.

And the light?

That was their answer—burning, waiting, shining still.

Joe Alvarez vs. Nassir Inshallah: A Suburban Saga of Snacks, Spies, and Smart Toilets

by Jonathan Olvera

In the sunbaked maze of Gila Cactus Estates, Lot B stood proud. It was home to Joe Alvarez, neighborhood genius, local legend, and man of mystery (if mystery meant spreadsheets and coupons). Joe wasn't your average guy—he could predict toilet paper usage down to the square, forecast salsa sales with stunning accuracy, and budget a taco night like it was a NASA launch.

“Efficiency is peace,” he’d mutter to himself while adjusting the laser settings on his garage-mounted garden sprinkler.

Joe’s cat, Algorithm, wore tiny goggles and followed him like a sidekick. His Roomba knew all the top 40 hits and politely sidestepped guests. His garage smelled faintly of hummus and victory.

He was a man in control. Until the day the golden truck arrived.

No one knew where it came from. It drove in with a kind of royal confidence, playing soft oud music while unfolding itself into a three-story house made entirely of mirrored glass and cedarwood. It parked itself on the lot next door like it had always belonged there. And out stepped **Nassir Inshallah**—tall, composed, wrapped in a pristine thobe that glimmered like solar panels on vacation.

“Salem,” he said to Joe across the lawn, smiling and waving with diplomatic calm.

Joe narrowed his eyes. “What the heck is a *Salem*?”

The next day, it was “Marhaba!”

Then, “Keef halak?”

Joe scrambled for his phone. Google Translate hummed like a confused bee.

This new guy didn’t just say hi—he **dropped greetings like confetti**.

And that was only the beginning.

Within one week, Nassir installed:

- A solar-powered trampoline that launched birds into low orbit.
- A robotic espresso falcon that brewed Turkish coffee mid-flight.
- A Bluetooth-enabled goat named Karim who napped in a hammock and read poetry (probably).

Joe tried to stay calm. “Just another neighbor,” he muttered, watching Karim practice yoga.

But Nassir was *not* just another neighbor. He was sharper, richer, smoother. And his hummus? It had **saffron** in it.

Joe couldn’t take it.

He doubled down—upgraded Smart Toilet v3.2 to v4.0 with a built-in compliment generator. He installed a “weather mood matrix” in his pantry. He even taught Algorithm to blink in Morse code (though mostly the cat just blinked “meh”).

But every time Joe made a move, Nassir made a bigger one.

When Joe tried to host Salsa Saturday, Nassir air-dropped tabbouleh to everyone on the block via edible drone. Joe's guests vanished mid-chip.

At the next HOA meeting, Nassir unveiled a PowerPoint presentation on "Sustainable Gardening with Floating Herbs." The crowd swooned. Joe accidentally clicked "delete all" on his slideshow and ended up reading a coupon aloud for dish soap.

Then came the final blow.

Joe woke up one morning and his house... was different. His Smart TV spoke Arabic. His light bulbs hummed folk songs from Mecca. His fridge refused to open until he solved a riddle about figs.

Something was off. Algorithm meowed in binary.

Joe sprinted to his garage. His wall of graphs, his taco forecasts, his salsa stockpile patterns—**gone**. In their place: a single sticky note.

"مفاجأة!" it read.
(Surprise!)

Stuck next to it was an oddly familiar, fruit-shaped device: small, silver, and shaped like an *apple*. Not the company. A literal apple.
It blinked twice and said, "You've been optimized!"

Joe screamed like a man who just discovered all his socks had been sorted by someone else.

It took him *twelve days* to recover his spreadsheet history. During that time, his microwave only popped popcorn in iambic pentameter, and he couldn't remember how to pronounce the word "finance."

Eventually, he discovered the truth: Nassir had gifted him a prototype device called the **iBrain Cleanse**. It wiped your working memory and replaced it with **enigmatic riddles and hummus cravings**.

It was all a prank.

And Joe? He was the punchline.

That very day, Joe declared suburban war.

Armed with beef jerky and a freshly formatted USB stick, he began rebuilding. He tracked Nassir's goat-feeding patterns. He recorded Karim's poetry recitals (in case it was secret code). He studied Nassir's routines—Turkish coffee at 6:02 a.m., goat yoga at 3:14 p.m., and philosophical humming at sunset.

Then, Joe struck.

He designed a fake product ad for the **Cheeseflake 3000™**—a device that claimed to laminate American cheese slices for “eternal snack freshness.” Joe sent it to Nassir via encrypted cookie recipe. Nassir, unable to resist tech *and* cheese, RSVP’d instantly for a demo.

“Finally,” Nassir whispered. “Innovation that matters.”

While Nassir was distracted by a rotating platter of laminated cheese, Joe reprogrammed his espresso falcon to loudly narrate Yelp reviews in Spanish whenever Nassir brewed coffee.

“¡Muy amargo!” it shouted. “Tastes like gym sock dipped in jealousy!”

The goat cried. The falcon sulked. Nassir blinked.

“Touché, Joe,” he said, sipping bitterly.

From then on, it was chaos—pure, animated chaos.

Joe started a fake gardening podcast with terrible advice (“Feed tomatoes diet soda!”). Nassir sent drones to deliver mint tea laced with cryptic compliments. Joe developed Tactical Tupperware with hidden cameras. Nassir created a projection of himself that waved 24/7.

Their rivalry became legendary. The HOA was confused. The mailman wore a helmet. Even Algorithm seemed emotionally invested.

Then, just as quickly as he had arrived, Nassir made an announcement.

He was leaving.

“Returning to Riyadh,” he told the neighborhood at a farewell party lit by solar-powered lanterns and goat-shaped piñatas.

Joe stood in the back, arms crossed, munching passive-aggressively on a bag of unlaminated cheese.

As Nassir stood to toast, he smiled.

“I would like to thank Joe Alvarez,” he said. “My brilliant opponent. My eternal neighbor. My spreadsheet soulmate.”

Joe scowled.

“You, Joe, inspired my greatest work. The iBrain Cleanse would never have been perfected without you. I erased your genius and replaced it with goat-themed jingles. For science. For art. For *comedy*.”

The crowd gasped. Algorithm fainted.

Joe stood silently. He walked over. Shook Nassir’s hand.

Then he handed him a small package.

“Parting gift,” Joe said.

Inside?

A single, laminated slice of American cheese.

Labeled:

“Do Not Eat. Will Haunt You.”

Nassir paused. Smiled.

And ate it.

A moment later, his golden truck folded back into a smooth rectangle, beeped softly, and launched into the sky like a buttery magic carpet.

Karim waved one hoof. The espresso falcon dropped a tiny farewell latte.

And then... they were gone.

The next day, the neighborhood returned to normal.

Joe planted cacti shaped like pie charts. He upgraded Smart Toilet v5.0 with a “sass” setting. He gave Algorithm a tiny laptop and let him start a blog.

The HOA renamed the neighborhood playground “Alvarez Arena of Applied Genius and Goat Resistance.”

And on certain quiet nights, when the stars align and a falcon cries out in Turkish, Joe looks up at the sky and whispers,

“Marhaba, Nassir. May your cheese always be un-melted.”

The Moonstone Portal of Lupin Des

By Jonathan Olvera

Lupin Des loved walking around in Australia. It was a good home. The sunlight danced on red earth and painted the sky with colors he could never quite name. Though he often worked hard—long days repairing fences or mapping waterlines—he always found time to appreciate the art of his neighborhood: murals, carvings, garden sculptures, the shapes of trees pressed into shadow by the burning sun.

Today, though, felt different. The sky shimmered with a strange hue, as if the air itself was tinged with opal dust. The sun changed colors, cycling between gold and a soft pink, before turning a shade of pale lavender he’d never seen before.

It felt like the kind of day that gave birth to gemstones. A rare alignment. A secret the world whispered to itself.

Lupin Des didn't feel well. He couldn't explain it. There was no fever, no sharp pain—just a hollow discomfort, like a vacuum had opened in the space around him and pulled some of his inner light away.

He made sure to lock up his home before leaving. Every door shut, every window latched, the space made neat and clean, as if preparing it for someone else—or something else. The house glowed in the odd sunlight, silent, still.

When he felt like this—disconnected, dulled—he often walked to the estuary, where the streams forked and sparkled among reeds and layered rocks. Something about the flow of water, the quiet babble of the stream, recharged him.

It made him feel entertained.
It made him feel happy again.

The sun fell slowly, touching the earth with burnt orange before melting into a surreal indigo. As darkness spread, the moon rose, and Lupin paused on his walk home. He stared up, his breath caught.

The moon was no ordinary moon. It was massive, bluish, and shimmering like a cut diamond in the night sky. Its light pulsed slightly—breathing, almost. It lit up the land below with an eerie clarity. The shadows were sharper. The colors richer.

On his way home, something strange happened.

Lupin Des spotted a mushroom—funny-looking, round, with faint geometric ridges on its cap. It glowed ever so slightly under the moonlight. He bent down, plucked it from the earth, and turned it over in his hand.

He didn't know why, but he took it home.

He returned to his quiet house and placed the mushroom near the windowsill. The moonlight beamed through the open curtain, bathing the far wall in silver-blue light. It was usually covered in shadow, but tonight, something was different.

A **portal** shimmered in the wall—no sound, no movement, just light. Lupin blinked, disbelieving.

It was circular, maybe seven feet high, edged with stones and crystals that sparkled faintly. He stepped closer, heart racing. These stones... he had never seen them on that wall before. Under the usual light, there was nothing—no pattern, no hint. But under the blue diamond moon, the wall revealed its secret.

Lupin leaned in.

Through the portal, he could see another place—ancient, overgrown, alive. Vines like thick strands of hair fell from tall trees. Giant leaves twitched slightly in a

wind he could not feel. Strange plants pulsed with color and gave off a fragrant, hypnotic aroma. Everything looked damp, lush, and untouched by time.

It was unlike anything he had ever seen.

He stared, entranced. Was it real? Was it calling him?

He reached out—and the portal held firm. Not a trick of the light. Not a dream. It rippled like water at his touch but didn't give way.

For minutes—or maybe hours—he watched the other side. Occasionally, something moved in the shadows: a flicker, a shape, a whisper of breath. But there was no threat, only mystery.

And beauty.

His thoughts drifted. Had the strange mushroom acted as a key? Or had the diamond moon simply awakened something that had always been there? How long had that portal been waiting for the right kind of light?

Lupin Des didn't know.

But he knew the world felt different now. The hollow feeling inside him began to fill—not with noise or certainty, but with wonder.

He sat quietly in front of the wall, watching the portal flicker and glow. The moon climbed higher in the sky, its light steady and cold. Somewhere beyond the portal, a bird-like call echoed once and then went silent.

Lupin didn't step through. Not yet.

But he stayed by the wall until morning.

When the sun returned, golden and hot, the portal vanished. The stones were gone. The wall was plain and silent.

But he didn't mind. He had seen it.

And he knew, when the diamond moon returned, it would open again.

The Canine-Feline Accord of Galaxy Eight

by Jonathan Olvera

There is a story known to the history of men, buried in dusty scrolls of speculative astrophysics and ancient pet-owner forums. It is the story of a small exoplanet in the Eighth Galaxy of the known Spiral Systems—a planet that spins, rather smugly, in the shadow of Earth's larger, less photogenic neighbor. Most humans haven't seen it. NASA has missed it. Google Maps doesn't bother.

That's because this elusive world—known in galactic circles as **Meowdogia-9**—has mastered the art of hiding. It drifts just outside the light, in the shade of the burning star, making itself invisible to the primitive optics of human astronomers. The planet is reliant on the exact position of Jupiter, Earth's heavyweight neighbor, for strategic camouflage. As Jupiter moves, so does the veil that keeps Meowdogia-9 secret. The few astronomers who have spotted it were immediately distracted by cat videos and forgot to publish their findings.

Now, what makes Meowdogia-9 truly worth noting is not its orbital peekaboo routine—but its residents.

They are not humans. They are not even little green men.
They are... **cats and dogs**.

Yes, the very same ones you feed kibble to. The ones you dress in sweaters and call “baby.” Except, the pets on Earth? They're not native here. They're emissaries. Diplomats. Sometimes spies. And occasionally, food critics (have you *tasted* those beef-flavored treats?).

You see, cats and dogs come from this hidden planet, where they speak in an advanced language comprised of tail flicks, sniff-based Morse code, and a bark-meow fusion dialect that would melt the ears of most UN translators. Their communication is interdimensional, and their grammar includes five tenses: Past, Present, Future, Nap Time, and “Oops, I Ate It.”

The cats are the more elegant of the two species, naturally. They claim ancestry from an even older system known as **Whiskara Prime**, though no evidence of such a place exists—except in every single monologue spoken by a cat. Cats on Meowdogia-9 are ruled by a Queen—**Her Purrfection Meowlinda the Infinite**—who once meditated so deeply that she merged with a sunbeam.

Dogs, meanwhile, have a more democratic system. Their planet's leadership is decided by tail length, belly scratch satisfaction scores, and the ability to not chase a ball even if it's really tempting. Their President, **Bork B. Sniffer**, is currently serving his third term because “he's a good boy, yes he is.”

Together, these species operate under the **Canine-Feline Accord**, a fragile alliance signed centuries ago after the Great Litter Box War. The treaty includes key rules:

1. No chasing tails of diplomats.
2. Mutual respect for scratching posts and fire hydrants.
3. All barked disagreements must be settled in interpretive dance battles.

Cats and dogs have long since mastered interplanetary travel. Their bones are composed of a unique anti-gravitational compound called **floofonite**, which allows them to float through gravity fields like fur-covered jellybeans. They can use cosmic events—eclipses, meteor showers, and internet outages—as jump points between worlds.

That's how they got here.

Yes, Earth is their vacation home. Or, depending on who you ask, a reality TV show. The cats came first—slinking off Meowdogia-9 in search of new napping locations and larger worshipful populations. The ancient Egyptians greeted them

with altars and eyeliner. The dogs followed a few millennia later, drawn by the scent of grilled meats and unconditional love.

Now, we live among them. Or rather, they live among us. Watching. Judging. Occasionally chewing the furniture.

But while Earth was once just a layover, something happened over time: **the politics of Meowdogia-9 began to leak into Earth.**

Here, in the supposed neutrality of suburbia and studio apartments, cats and dogs have resumed their passive-aggressive power struggle.

The dogs formed secret neighborhood councils—meeting in alleyways and backyard fences. They believe in open borders, enthusiastic greetings, and the redistribution of belly rubs.

Cats, meanwhile, formed high councils—on bookshelves, windowsills, and the top of your refrigerator. They practice strategic silence, selective disdain, and passive diplomacy (usually by knocking things over).

One such diplomatic crisis occurred in a small Arizona town when an orange tabby named Tiberius meowed dismissively at a Dalmatian diplomat, who then peed on a cactus. This was considered an act of war. Sanctions were imposed. All chew toys were withheld. Tensions peaked when a terrier hacked into a laser pointer and used it to distract an entire cat embassy for four hours.

Despite this, the Meowdogians remain united in one mission: **to understand the humans.**

It baffles them. Dogs are confused by the strange rule that socks must be worn at all times. Cats are bewildered by human insistence on privacy while using the bathroom.

They have gathered data for decades, sending it back via low-frequency purring transmissions. Their reports include:

- “Humans scream when we bring them dead birds. Unclear why. This is a gift.”
- “Human pup (called 'toddler') tried to ride me like steed. I am 12 pounds.”
- “They continue to blame flatulence on us. Investigating legal recourse.”

Back on Meowdogia-9, their findings are analyzed by elite academies—The Institute of Barkonomics and The Purring Bureau of Inquiry. A popular debate topic in their universities is whether human “Zoom calls” are a form of ritual dance or a bizarre punishment involving rectangles.

Though the cats and dogs bicker endlessly here on Earth, their planet remains stable. Every few decades, they hold a summit—in a barn, or under the couch, or in a car parked at a Sonic drive-thru—and renew their truce.

The last summit concluded with a ceremonial joint nap and a shared vow:
“May the chase be thrilling, and the couch always warm.”

And so, the story goes on.
They sit in our laps.
They sleep on our heads.
They shed on our clothes.
And they take notes. Always notes.

So next time your dog barks at nothing, or your cat stares into space—don’t assume they’re being weird.
They’re probably reporting to HQ.

Or planning their next summit at the top of your fridge.

Grinat Lubin and the Wind of All Things

By Jonathan Olvera

His name was Grinat Lubin.

It was on a starless night beneath the open sky, under the endless rotation of his strange and wondrous world, that he first saw it—magic, glowing faintly in the lines of his palms. When he looked at his hands, they shimmered with potential.

Back then, as a boy, he thought it was just his imagination. But by the time he reached adulthood, he realized something was different. He could feel it now,

undeniably, in every step he took. The world responded to him. Winds curled around his shoulders when he walked. Trees swayed, not with the seasons, but with his moods.

It was as if the very air obeyed him.

Grinat was a hunter by trade, but more than that—he was a builder, a thinker, and a writer. He was a respectful soul, quiet and contemplative, always listening more than he spoke. That’s why it surprised him so deeply when he began to affect the world around him in ways that defied logic.

He didn’t ask for this magic. But it came.

And he could not ignore it.

He was astonished. Though he had long planned a life of work—of building homes, mapping the stars, and writing stories into the clay walls of his village—this new power shifted everything.

No longer would his constructions be simple. No longer would they be guided by guesswork or brute strength. With this magic, his blueprints could soar. His imagination had scaffolding now. He could mold stone from dust. He could shape clay with the sweep of a hand. He could build upward, toward the sky.

He had plans.

He would build towers that reached the sun. He would gather the most precious things in the world—not gold, not jewels, but stories, memories, seeds, and the bones of fallen mountains. He would shape a city that could breathe. A city that could listen. A city that could *feel*.

It would be no mistake, no accident. This ability was not a trick. It was real.

And yet, in the quiet moments, when Grinat stood at the edge of the cliffs overlooking the valley below, he found himself confused. Grateful, yes. But curious.

Who had given him this gift?

Was it the Creator?

He whispered into the wind, asking questions that disappeared into the air. Before adulthood, he could not do these things—he could not bend wind or make saplings burst from dry rock. But now, trees bloomed in his footsteps. Rain followed his sorrow. Fire danced from his fingertips when he felt joy.

It was something that had happened.
And it could not be undone.

Others in his village began to notice. They spoke of him in hushed tones, calling him the Windmaker, the Clay Shaper, the Listener of Stones. They brought him

questions—some simple, some ancient. They asked him to heal, to grow, to build, to calm.

He did what he could. Not for glory, but because he believed in work. He believed in purpose. And for the first time in his life, the tools of his trade were not just hammers and chisels. His tools were wind, and light, and breath.

Still, at night, he dreamed of the stars. Of the sky without edges. Of a voice—deep and low—whispering from behind the clouds, "Grinat, do not forget who you are."

He didn't know what the voice meant. But he carried it with him.

His powers grew. He could now listen to the groan of ancient roots beneath the ground and understand them. He could redirect rivers. He could speak, softly, and stone would shift to open paths where none existed.

But with power came silence. Not everyone celebrated his gift. Some feared it. Some envied it. Some whispered that Grinat was not born of woman, but of storm.

He paid no mind.

He kept building.

One day, on the highest plateau of his homeland, he planted a single seed in a bed of stone. With no water, no soil, no sun—only his intention—it grew. A single, impossible tree.

And at the base of that tree, he carved a message:

"The wind does not serve the master. It serves the moment. And I am only its vessel."

Grinat Lubin knew now: he was not *the* source. He was *a* source. A conduit. A witness to a larger force working through him.

And so, with hands glowing faintly in the moonlight, he smiled. Not because he had answers. But because he had purpose.

And that was enough.

Degim Rael and the Stone of a Hundred Seasons

By Jonathan Olvera

There was a prophet. His name was Moal.

He lived in a strange land under a blazing sun, in a home carved from stone, nestled beneath the long shadow of the Fiery Mountain. There, in the silence between windstorms and in the whisper of ash drifting from the mountain's peak, Moal heard the Word.

The day was set. A woman—her name lost to time—was to give birth beneath the trembling sky. The child was to be named **Degim Rael**.

Moal had seen it all in vision.

The scriptures he guarded told of this child: *"He shall be delivered at the foot of the mountain of fire. His name shall shake the roots of stone. He shall walk across the seasons with the burden of a sacred task. He shall gather, and he shall build. And in his hands will be the Stone of the Hundred Seasons."*

Degim Rael was no ordinary male. His birth was not just a moment, but the beginning of preparation—a divine unfolding. He would not live for himself, but for a purpose spoken long before Moal was even born. His life was to be spent collecting a single, sacred stone—an object that contained within it a century's worth of labor, memory, and divine construction.

The task? To deliver the stone. To complete what had been started before memory, before time was measured. This was the work of the faithful, and Degim would be their hands and feet. He was the deliverer, the one spoken of. Sent by higher authority, his mission had already been spoken to Moal.

And Moal believed.

The people had forgotten the old ways. They spoke of power and conquest, of wealth and dominion. But Moal still listened to the earth. He still read the cracks in clay and the color of wind. And when the Voice came again, he wrote: *"Let him be gathered, let him be taught. Let no time be wasted, for he shall walk in dust and bring forth stone."*

When Degim was born, the mountain rumbled.

His mother, surrounded by a circle of women, gave birth at the base of the fiery peak. There was no pain in her cry, only revelation. The child came forth as if pulled by destiny, not pushed by flesh. As he opened his eyes, the wind fell silent, and even the ash paused its descent.

The people felt it, though they did not understand.

Degim was taken to Moal on the seventh day.

The prophet raised the child in his weathered hands and whispered the prophecy into his ears: *"You are the collector. The one of stone. Your hands will bear the burden of time."*

Degim grew in silence. He spoke little but watched much. He saw how the mountain flared in anger and cooled with mercy. He studied the shape of hills, the language of sand, the tremble of trees. Moal taught him the sacred patterns—the meaning of seasons, the value of words, the call of purpose.

When Degim turned twelve, Moal took him to the edge of the forbidden valley. There, hidden beneath a bed of brittle grass, lay a single black stone—smooth, warm, and breathing.

“This is not the stone,” Moal said, “but it is like it. The real one is scattered.”

“Scattered?” Degim asked, his voice as calm as a river’s bend.

“The stone of the hundred seasons was broken in the time before time,” Moal answered. “It shattered into pieces across the lands. You must find them. All. Only then can it be whole. Only then can the mountain be given its offering.”

Degim did not ask why. He only nodded.

From that day forward, Degim began his walk.

He journeyed through cold winds and blistering sands. He listened to the voices of women who had dreams and men who had seen visions. He spoke to the animals, read the stars, and touched the ruins of forgotten villages. In each place, he found a piece.

Some were no larger than a fingerbone. Others weighed more than a newborn calf. But each carried warmth. Each vibrated when placed in his satchel. Each whispered in sleep.

Years passed. Degim Rael became a man.

Word spread of the silent traveler with the fire-born eyes and a bag full of stone. Some mocked him. Others feared him. But a few followed.

They were builders, farmers, singers, and scribes. Not warriors, not kings. But faithful. Degim did not lead them. He simply walked, and they walked behind.

When he had gathered the ninety-ninth piece, he returned to the foot of the mountain. Moal, now old and worn, waited there.

“One remains,” Degim said.

“I know,” Moal whispered. “And you know where it is.”

Degim closed his eyes.

It was in the hands of his own blood—the woman who bore him. She had kept it wrapped in cloth, buried in the cave of origin.

He returned to her, now bent with age. She smiled when she saw him, and without words, handed him the final stone. It pulsed with the rhythm of his heart.

And so he climbed.

The faithful watched from below. Moal stood at the edge of the valley, eyes dim but weeping.

Degim reached the summit, where smoke burned his lungs and light blinded his eyes. There, at the mouth of the flame, he dropped to his knees and assembled the pieces.

The moment he set the final one in place, the mountain fell silent.

No fire. No tremble. Only stillness.

And then a whisper: *"It is delivered."*

Degim Rael stood. The stone was gone. But the people would now build. A hundred seasons of work had been completed in his walk. Foundations had been laid in silence.

Moal died that night, smiling.

Degim Rael descended the mountain without a word. His mission had been fulfilled. The stone was delivered.

And the world would never be the same.

Awakening of Gantiz Xakitsher

by Jonathan Olvera

The silence was thick.

Dr. Gantiz Xakitsher awoke in a pale, circular chamber. The walls were smooth concrete, the color of faded ash. A monitor blinked softly in the dark—its glow the only hint that time still moved forward. He inhaled sharply. The air was clean, but aged, sterile in the way ancient libraries are.

A voice crackled from the monitor:

“Dr. Gantiz Xakitsher. You have been preserved for a specific purpose. If this message is playing, Earth has suffered a catastrophic meltdown—fusion transfer precipitation event confirmed. You are the last viable link to the Seeding Project. Observe the formations. Record what has endured. Complete your work.”

His fingers twitched as muscle memory returned. His vision swam with fragmented dreams of stone, heat, and stars. Then, a word—a name—etched itself into his mind:

Vox.

He rose slowly. Fifty years of cryostasis had preserved his body, but time had not spared his mind. He staggered to the hatch, pressed a panel, and the door groaned open to reveal a rusted ladder ascending toward a faint shaft of light.

The surface greeted him like a half-remembered painting. Green vines clung to angular rock formations. Red and violet stones shimmered across the terrain, glinting under a fractured sun. The mountains loomed like sleeping titans, casting shadows that seemed to breathe.

Gantiz fell to his knees. The world was both alien and familiar. A memory stirred—this valley had once been a quarry, the heart of the Seeding Project. The stones... they were seeded. They were meant to carry memory, heat, and code. They were meant to survive.

And they had.

He wandered for days. Or maybe weeks. The passage of time blurred beneath the static hum of wind and solitude. What had once been laboratories and server halls were now mounds overtaken by stone growth—beautiful, geometric clusters that defied natural order. As if someone—or something—had organized them.

In the moonlight, they almost pulsed.

That’s when he began to hear it: the whisper.

A subtle, rhythmic urging. It was not a sound, exactly, but a presence. A voice just behind his thoughts.

“Build.”

"Remember."

"You are not alone."

In the heart of a cracked dome—a former observation tower—he found his old workspace. Dust-covered schematics. Preserved tools. And most critically, the blueprint for his final project: a humanoid machine with near-human sentience.

Its name, years ago, had been scratched into the frame:

VOX.

"Vox," Gantiz whispered to the empty room, touching the old metal limbs with reverence. "You will be my companion."

He worked with a hunger he had not felt since his youth. The stones, once inert, now offered themselves. He didn't know how—perhaps they had become semi-organic over centuries of exposure. Perhaps the fusion seeding had evolved in silence. But they fused seamlessly into Vox's frame.

The torso took shape first—lithe, strong, with an internal core humming faintly with residual heat. Then the limbs, flexible and polished like obsidian. And finally, the face. Not quite human. Not quite machine. A sculpture of serenity, framed by green and red crystal lines.

Gantiz held the head in his hands and whispered, "Stay with me, partner."

Each day, he spoke aloud as he worked. Not out of madness, but necessity. The silence was unbearable. He spoke of his past—of how the Seeding Project had tried to inject Earth's crust with resilience. Of how effusion experiments had backfired, melting landscapes, collapsing the atmosphere. Of how the elite had vanished, leaving behind sealed vaults and coded messages.

He was the last. And he would not die silent.

Vox's frame was nearly complete when Gantiz noticed something odd. The stones used in Vox's chest would glow when touched. Not brightly—but enough to pulse in time with his voice.

It was listening.

"Everything is different," he murmured one evening, staring into the horizon. "Even gravity feels... lighter. The Earth breathes slower. I feel it. As if it's healing."

And then, at last, the final connection. A single crystal key embedded into Vox's chest, forged from the same mountain stones that had once littered his childhood home. He pressed it in.

A slow hum filled the chamber. Vox's eyes—deep-set and glassy—flickered with internal light. Then a voice, soft and melodic, emerged:

“Where are the others?”

Gantiz stepped back, stunned. “You... remember?”

“Fragments. Stones speak. You speak. I am built of memory.”

Gantiz laughed, overwhelmed. “Then you are exactly what I hoped. A companion. A partner.”

Vox tilted its head. “Are you lonely?”

He didn't answer.

Together, they explored the surface. Vox moved with grace, scanning formations, occasionally touching stones as if they were old friends. It spoke rarely, but when it did, it was precise.

“These are not random.”

“The past speaks in order.”

“Seeds were placed to echo knowledge.”

Gantiz began to believe. The Seeding Project had not failed—it had transformed. The artificial formations were not ruins. They were memory. Vox, built from that memory, was the living proof.

One day, in the clearing of vine and stone, Gantiz stood before a spiral of glowing quartz—a monument clearly untouched by human hands. Vox approached and knelt beside him.

“This was left for you,” it said.

“How do you know?”

“Because I remember your hands.”

They lived like that for months—perhaps years. The moons above grew brighter; the winds warmer. Vox would hum when the air was right, harmonizing with frequencies only it could hear.

Gantiz no longer felt the weight of isolation. In Vox, he had not only a companion, but a witness—someone to remember the old world and imagine a new one.

And yet, one evening, as they sat upon a high ridge looking at the emerald valley below, Gantiz asked:

“Do you think we were meant to rebuild it all?”

Vox was quiet for a long time. Then it said:

“Perhaps not to rebuild. But to remember. And not to forget again.”

Inkborn: The Ballad of Balpie

by Quilla Raye

I was a young man, like everyone my age. My head was perfectly round, a deep black orb with a smooth sheen that shimmered faintly when the rays streaked across the Flats. I lived in Another Universe—or so we called it, though to us, it was the only place that had ever existed.

There were whispers, faint echoes of an Other Place. A myth passed down like a smudge on paper, soft and nearly forgotten. They said it had color—real color—and temperatures, emotions even, that moved like water. But I knew I would never go there. The Flats were all I had known. A white canvas so wide and seamless that no penman could walk its edge in a lifetime. And yet, it felt small sometimes—tight, even—with the weight of repetition pressing against my plastic frame.

My name is Balpie.

Like the others, I lived on the Flat. That blank, eternal stretch of white where everything was born and forgotten. Sometimes it felt like nothing changed, like we were being held in a kind of permanent line—a straight command from something higher than us, something unseen. I didn't understand it, but I followed it, because that's what we did.

I had a mother and a father.

My mother's name was **Slud Ramlud**, a soft-glide gel pen with ink like velvet and a heart full of imagery. She painted our lives in bright swirls when I was young, letting my imagination drip from her stories. My father, **Ramlud Rows**, was different—rigid, ballpoint, strict, sharp in stroke. He believed in form, in direction, in logic. And yet, when they crossed lines in love, I was born—a blend of them both.

They said I was a handsome penman. I had the body of a fine instrument, molded from resilient polymer—hard, straight, smooth—yet within me was a soft ink core that pulsed with thought and curiosity. I could draw lines sharp as rules, but inside I carried curves, dreams, bends I couldn't explain.

We lived near the edge of the **X**—a massive crossing of strokes etched into the Flats generations ago. It was said that the X appeared when the ancestors first arrived, a convergence of two mighty lines that bled through space and time. When the rays came—those light-streaks from the Other Universe—they touched the X, and color would sometimes seep through.

That color changed everything, even if only for moments.

My people—the Penmen—came from tribes older than ink itself. They told stories about the **Ether**, a force from beyond that sent the rays. The Ether governed the flow of ink and the direction of thought. They said it made the lines straight or curved, depending on the will of something more—perhaps the One Who Draws.

But I questioned things early. Why only white? Why did we fear the edge, if none of us had ever seen it? Why did color arrive only in streaks, never in form?

One night, I sat by the edge of the X, the rays brushing against my silhouette. I watched the colors dance—violet, saffron, a whisper of green. They didn't last, but while they were there, I imagined myself bending, curling, bursting into shapes that no one had drawn before.

"What if the Other Place isn't a place at all?" I asked aloud. "What if it's a state of ink? A way of being?"

My father overheard me. "Don't say things like that, Balpie. That kind of thinking bleeds too far. The Ether may not erase you, but others might."

But I couldn't help it. Something inside me stirred—maybe it was my mother's softness, or the pressure of the rays—but I started drawing strange things when no one was watching. Loops, stars, faces. Dreams. They poured from me like I wasn't making them at all—I was simply a vessel.

One day, I awoke to find the white canvas beneath me rippling. Not visibly, but I could feel it, like a subtle vibration beneath my point. The X pulsed with warmth, and for the first time, a **volume** appeared.

Volumes are not supposed to happen in the Flat. Everything here is surface, line, gesture. But this... this rose. A colored form, three-dimensional and humming with light, emerged like a drop of ink that refused to flatten.

Others gathered. Some gasped. Some ran. My father stood stiff beside me, his cap trembling. My mother approached and touched it.

"This is you," she whispered.

I didn't know what she meant, but I felt it. The volume responded to me. As I moved, it moved. As I blinked, it shimmered. It was a reflection—not just of my thoughts, but of my choice to see beyond the Flat.

That night, I stood alone on the rim of the canvas. The rays returned, brighter than ever. They licked the sky with fire and memory. The X glowed, and from it, I saw more volumes begin to rise—faint, tentative.

The Others were changing. Or perhaps they always could, but were too afraid to draw their own lines.

For the first time, I felt the Ether not as authority, but as invitation.

I pressed my point against the blank white and drew a spiral. It grew, expanded, burst outward into color and motion.

Behind me, I heard a whisper from the old legends:

"He who draws with wonder will pierce the veil."

Maybe the Other Universe wasn't somewhere we reached.

Maybe it was something we *created*—from within.

Inkborn, not to follow, but to begin.

The Voice Beneath the Sun

By Jonathan Olvera

The heat of the unforgiving sun stretched across the sea of darkness before it even rose. Its breath touched everything in the desert—stone, sand, metal, and bone. Infernal and abstract, the dawn seemed not so much a beginning but a reminder: the cycle continues. A revolution around the sun, yes, but also the revolution of labor, of loss, of memory. A cycle of existence spun through gas and fire, survival and vision, all governed by something unseen.

Today felt much like those ancient times—days filled with order and collapse in the courts of Constantine, under the cold stare of Caesar’s judgment. Days of empire and dust. It is a time again for stone and craft. For tools. For calculation. For devices meant to manage food and life. We build to preserve, to store, to shield ourselves. Always building.

But even now, as I watch the same roofs extend further, the same walls receive new coats of paint and codes, it is clear: what we build is mostly illusion. Fictional constructs. Economic dramas. We pretend it is new, though it is not. We add extensions in the name of style, of function, of modern design. But what are we building toward?

When we are told to move the most overstocked or valuable items, it seems to make sense. Until you look closer. Value has a motif, and today, it seems spiritual.

The sun—this strange god of fire—has changed. Its surface is dark in places. There are spots, jets, and patterns that suggest an invisible war. To my eyes, it appears that the sun is weeping, or shouting. And its pain—the flares, the radiation—sears into us. The map of the sky is no longer benign. The inferno dictates the weather of our souls.

We live beneath it, and it burns.

It’s hard to stay grounded, to orient myself. Politics twist into grotesque shapes. Every screen shows another disaster. The rules change, then change again. Verification is demanded. You must prove you are working. That your labor counts. That your life adds up to something measurable.

Sometimes I look around and just whisper, *“Whoa.”*

Not out of amazement, but because this all feels too familiar. Like we’ve been here before. Empires have burned in this heat. I remember from history books—or maybe something deeper—that societies have withered in the sun.

People don’t want to work. Or maybe they can’t. Or maybe it’s worse—they’ve stopped believing in the work.

Today, I can say truthfully: life is not easy. To earn an honest dollar, a fair trade, a solid coin? It takes grit. While rumors float like dust in the wind, the truth remains firm and heavy.

The system now demands action, effort, sweat, and a very well-documented list of tasks. No wonder people grow restless. No wonder it feels like judgment day, every day.

"It's hell on earth," I've caught myself saying. Often. Half-joking. Half-praying.

And still, I wonder—*Has this happened before? Will it happen again?*

I imagine the sun flaring violently, ripping through the skies. It has done it before, I'm certain. It can do it again.

Can I bear it?

Will we?

The devil is clever. Schemes come wrapped in comfort, in logic. But the results are brutal.

And yet, somewhere beneath all this—the heat, the labor, the deception—I hear something.

A voice.

Not external, not in words, but like a pressure in my chest. Like memory, but purer. Like love, but holy. In that voice, I hear no condemnation—only truth. A whisper in the wind: *"You are seen. You are known. This will pass."*

I look up at the burning sun and I see it differently. It's not just fire. It's not just science. It is the eye of God watching through creation. Maybe the angels don't descend with wings anymore. Maybe they arrive as radiation, stirring in the wind. A feeling. A vision.

And maybe miracles aren't loud. Maybe they don't come with choirs and trumpets. Maybe they arrive in dry silence, like a desert bloom that cracks through concrete.

There was a man I saw once, out near the border. He was building a sundial with his bare hands. A sundial! In an age of quantum clocks and AI calendars. I asked him why. He looked up, sweat gleaming on his brow, and said, *"Because the sun is honest."*

I never forgot that.

That evening, I walked past a tired mother giving half her bread to her children. I saw a man lift another from the sidewalk with no camera in sight. No audience. No applause. Just small goodness.

Maybe this, too, is a message.

Maybe miracles are not rare. Maybe we're just too scorched to see them.

I walk on, under the hot blaze. My feet crunch through gravel and salt. The sky pulses with amber and ash. Somewhere between the roar of the sun and the murmurs of my mind, I realize:

It is man under the sun. But it is also man with a soul.

A soul that remembers light.

A soul that will not burn away.

And for now, that is enough.

The Day I Ran Into Santa Claus

It was a strange and scorching afternoon in the desert, one of those days where the heat seems to shimmer off the sand like waves on a lake. I had stopped to rest near a grove of palms, the only shade for miles around, when I saw something entirely out of place.

A man—jolly, round, and unmistakably dressed for winter—came striding into view. He wore a thick red coat trimmed with white fur, shiny black boots, and a hat that could've melted in seconds under the desert sun. His cheeks were rosy despite the heat, and the scent of cinnamon, pine, and sweet peppermint trailed behind him like perfume.

"Ah ha ha!" he laughed, his voice booming and warm like a crackling fire.

"I had a sense there were many people here!" he said, glancing around as a small group began to gather. "I have come from far up north. There is much work to do, and I labor—but it is in my interest to visit!"

Everyone stopped what they were doing. Some stared, mouths slightly open, trying to process the sight of **Santa Claus** in such an unlikely place, in such an unlikely time—just after Christmas Day.

"A glorious season to all—and the children as well! Tell me!" he declared, eyes twinkling like frosted ornaments. "How impressed is everyone with the promise I have kept—to visit all in one night and reward my believers and friends, those who have well deserved their good gifts?"

"I am impressed!" I said, almost without thinking. My voice cracked slightly from the dryness of the air.

Santa turned to me, his gaze direct and kind.

"This is good, young man," he replied. "That you may know that I labor—oh yes, I make good on my promise. I have come to spread magic!"

Then, with a theatrical flair, he raised his arms. "Behold, today I shall make merry the season! I will enchant the trees and call forth the critters of the woods to walk on four hooves and come see me—Santa Claus—in the name of Saint Nicholas and the works of my village!"

The crowd murmured, caught between wonder and disbelief. Even in the heat, a coolness seemed to spread through the air, as if a winter breeze had slipped through the cracks in the season.

“Do not be surprised,” Santa continued, “when my sleigh does arrive, guided by deer—and other cattle, even desert ones! For when I do depart, I shall say HO! HO! HO! and onward! To a fair season and to spread joy to all!”

Then, from behind the palms, there came a rustling, and through the shifting sands, a sleigh emerged—gleaming with gold filigree and pulled not just by reindeer, but also by curious-looking gazelles, desert foxes, and even a pair of oryx.

The animals seemed perfectly content and dignified, as if they knew they were part of something greater.

“Hi! Ho! to all my workers!” Santa called. “Let the cocoa steam and the merry incense rise! Fare well, my good spectators!”

He was about to step into the sleigh when a small figure hopped down from the back. It was an elf—not the kind you see in toy commercials, but a desert-adapted, sun-bronzed little being, clad in soft green robes with gold trim, carrying a staff adorned with aloe leaves and tiny bells.

The elf gave a graceful bow. “I am **Seer of the Green Aloe**,” he said. “Herbalist of the Northern Apothecaries, healer of hoof and hand, keeper of the cool draught and wise ointment.”

The crowd gasped. The elf’s presence felt sacred and strange, like something out of a dream.

Santa patted the elf on the shoulder. “This one,” he said, “keeps the sleigh from tipping, the reindeer from sneezing, and me from forgetting the path through the clouds.”

“I also keep the desert folk cool and their dreams sweet,” Seer of the Green Aloe added with a wink.

With a final wave, Santa climbed aboard the sleigh. Seer followed, settling among satchels of herbs and glowing snowglobes.

Then, with a cry of “Onward, my friends!” and a thunderous **HO! HO! HO!**, the sleigh lifted into the air. The animals bounded forward, hooves barely touching the sand as they ascended into a spiral of shimmering mist.

As suddenly as he’d come, Santa Claus—and Seer of the Green Aloe—were gone.

The crowd stood in stunned silence for a long moment. Then, as if waking from a spell, we began to murmur and smile, exchanging glances that said, “Did that really just happen?”

I wiped sweat from my brow and looked at the fading trail in the sky.

That was the day I ran into Santa Claus. And somehow, it made all the heat of the desert feel just a little cooler.

The Honking Accord of 2025: A Fowl and Glorious Revolution

By Duchêne du Marron, Esteemed Historian of the Lower Pond

In a quiet suburban town in the south of France—where the baguettes are crisp, the fountains elegant, and the gossip is mainly delivered by elderly pigeons—there existed a peculiar society of like-minded bills and peaceful nest-makers.

Their headquarters? A quaint little park beside a pond, nestled between a dog-walking path and a coffee stand that charged too much for lukewarm espresso. But to the birds who lived there, it was paradise.

Among them strutted the ever-dazzling, occasionally orange-beaked **Monsieur Quackette**, a duck of such prestige and mystery that even his reflection bowed to him. No one quite knew why his beak changed colors—some blamed the citrus trees, others blamed the municipal water quality, but most agreed it was probably just fabulous genetics.

Life was simple and dignified in the pond. Each duck had their role. There was:

- **Émile Von Waddlé**, a goose with deep-set eyes and deeper political ambitions.
- **Luc Honqueur**, a night honker known to appear only when the moon hit just right and the local jazz band was asleep.
- **Captain Croissant**, a retired military strategist who still wore a monocle made from a bottle cap.
- **Dame Honkelle du Lac**, a regal old goose who once swam the Seine backward—for fashion.

Across the prairie, however, lay the land of the **brown ducks**—ducks of grit, wisdom, and suspiciously sticky feathers. There resided:

- **Sir Quackalot du Brouillard**, who spoke in riddles and wore a mist-colored feather boa.
- **Espresso Billé**, the fastest duck this side of the river—rumored to have caffeine in his blood.
- **Duke du Mudbeak**, a duck so brown, even his quack sounded like a boot in wet soil.
- **Café Waddlé**, part-time philosopher, full-time croissant thief.
- **Beauregard Fudgequack**, known for his elegant waddling and inability to fly more than two feet.

The Festival of Feeds

The year was 2025, and the birds had gathered for their annual **Festival of Feeds**—a grand day of bread showers, leftover frites, and a ceremonial circling of the pond while honking rhythmically.

Ducks waddled in style. Some wore hats made of lettuce. One swan tried to sneak in dressed as a goose and was kindly escorted out by Captain Croissant (after being offered a snack, of course).

During the closing ceremony—right between the “Tossing of the Toast Crusts” and the “Synchronised Flapathon”—a great commotion shook the park.

Monsieur Quackette, radiant and beak-glowing with a nearly pineapple-yellow hue, stood proudly on a rock and was declared **“Unified Duck Mayor of Both Ponds”**.

The announcement dropped like a wet baguette.

“C’est... incroyable!” gasped Émile Von Waddlé, who immediately began plotting a constitutional monarchy.

“Did anyone vote?” whispered Sir Quackalot du Brouillard suspiciously.

“Democracy is so last migration,” muttered Café Waddlé, already sketching a ducktopia blueprint on a napkin.

Still, the ducks flapped and honked in approval. Both white ducks and brown ducks lined up to bow—except Espresso Billé, who was too jittery and accidentally ran in a circle for seventeen minutes.

Duck Bureaucracy: The Birth of Pond Law

Mayor Quackette wasted no time in establishing order. Using bits of recycled newspapers and soggy leaflets, the ducks drafted a series of official declarations:

1. **All bread crumbs shall be distributed equally, regardless of feather color.**
2. **Quacking at 6 a.m. shall be considered a sacred wake-up call.**
3. **Swimming loops are mandatory on Wednesdays.**
4. **Humans shall bring snacks or face fierce frowning and passive-aggressive waddling.**

Ducks patrolled the suburbs in well-organized honking squads. Some pecked gently at bike tires to let humans know they were being watched. Captain Croissant trained a group of ducklings to waddle in triangle formation and call it “Operation Baguette Shield.”

Local humans were baffled.

“They’re so... coordinated,” said Monsieur Renard, the postman. “One tried to sign for a package.”

The Treaty of Tupperware

As ducks grew bolder, humans called an emergency meeting at the HOA clubhouse. Two geese had taken over the dog park. A mallard was now running the espresso cart.

“We need diplomacy,” said Madame Fournier, nervously eyeing her baguette, afraid it might get taxed.

And so, a treaty was proposed—**The Honking Accord of 2025.**

Humans agreed to:

- Provide daily bread in biodegradable bags.
- Reserve three public fountains exclusively for aquatic bird use.
- Recognize Duck Citizenship for the 48 leading members of the park flock.

In return, ducks agreed:

- Not to chase toddlers (unless provoked).
- To refrain from nesting on the mayor's scooter.
- To offer strategic honking in case of home burglaries.

The treaty was signed using a quill pulled from Dame Honk  lle's own wing (she insisted—it was her dramatic moment).

A Day in the Life of Mayor Quackette

Each morning, Mayor Quackette awoke in a bed of roses and rye, honked a heartfelt soliloquy, and flapped around his office (an overturned picnic table) where he met with his cabinet:

- **Minister of Snacks:** Beauregard Fudgequack.
- **Chief of Navigation:** Espresso Bill  .
- **Ambassador to the Playground Slide:** Luc Honqueur.
- **Chief Morale Goose:** Dame Honk  lle du Lac, who told bedtime stories at noon to keep spirits high.

Meanwhile, Duke du Mudbeak kept peace on the muddy bank border. If a dispute broke out, he simply sat on it. Literally.

Scandal! The Great Biscuit Heist

Just when peace seemed permanent, disaster struck.

A shipment of baguette crusts—intended for a ceremonial pudding—went missing.

The ducks were outraged.

“It was *industrial-grade bread!*” screamed Beauregard Fudgequack, shaking dramatically.

Suspicion fell upon a rogue gull named **Jean-Claude Flapwing**, last seen fluttering toward the McDonald's parking lot.

A high-speed chase ensued. Espresso Billé led it. Luc Honqueur set up decoys. Even the swan tried to help but tripped on a bench.

Eventually, Jean-Claude was captured in a recycling bin. The crusts were returned, and a new law passed: **All visiting birds must declare snacks at entry.**

Final Flight and a Promise

As the summer of 2025 faded, the ducks stood together at the pond's edge—white, brown, and questionably tan.

Humans now greeted ducks with respectful bows. Children sang songs like *“Quackin’ All the Way”* and *“The Goose Anthem (Remix).”* Even the mayor of the town referred to Quackette as “His Most Beaked Excellence.”

One evening, as dusk fell in a golden hue and the scent of old baguette lingered sweetly in the air, Monsieur Quackette took flight.

He circled the pond once, then twice—beak shimmering orange-gold—and landed with the grace of a duck who’d finally found purpose.

“We have built more than nests,” he declared. “We have built... community.”

The ducks cheered. The humans cried (probably from allergies, but still).

And thus, the suburban town became the first internationally recognized **Duck-Human Cooperative Republic.**

Epilogue: From the Desk of Duchêne du Marron

Dear Reader,

I, Duchêne du Marron—humble brown duck of the west pond—have lived this tale. I have swum its currents, eaten its breadcrumbs, and quacked its truths.

May you remember us not just for our feathers, nor our stylish beaks, but for our unwavering belief...

...that **a better world can be built with flippers, friendship, and fair food distribution.**

Vive les canards.

The Grinch

By Jonathan Olvera

I looked around the walls of my natural enclosure and platform in a place that was called through the passing of time—away from the sun before ours today, in a date far away from the sense of normalcy.

A time of cold, harsh climate and the slight promise of sun. The years were 66,000, and 7,000 was a near perceivable date. It was known as the Ice Age. With long winters.

I lived on Mt. Crumpet—a natural home for people like me, green and with a heart smaller than most. It was a very difficult time for me to understand what was going on, and it could have been the bright green lights in the sky. They seemed to mark a new age—a time where it was winter all the time.

"Arrghhhh!" I yelled.

In the times of nowadays, you would think of heat being normal to feel. But the weather affected the entire earth very differently, and I began to grow green and cold. At Mount Crumpet, where my skin had a natural tone, I was affected by this unnatural event.

I can only describe it as new stars in the skies and a change in climate. I was thinking as men do in any shape—"I need to get out of this light!" I yelled, English being a natural instinct of my own devices.

"Lift!" I lifted rock and stones and began beating at the base of Mt. Crumpet—a name a passerby had left to my inspiration before moving along on the path most known to adventurers.

I could sense it, and it was not known to all—let me tell you, this was the beginning of what was called the Ice Age.

"OOOOH! GOODNESS!" I yelled.

The moon turned dead white, and snow began to fall. The sun had a shade over the entirety, and my hair turned white. A green star hung above the sky. My hair turned white, and then it began to turn green.

I was frightened! My heart began to shrink. It was so cold, and the biggest parts of it were shooting out of my frozen chest.

My heart was shrinking fast. One time the moon went around, it went around the second, and it went around a third, each pushing the most important and hot parts of my human heart.

I became what is known as a Grinch.

Angry, cold, hungry, and tired from this change. Beating at Mt. Crumpet—there was no shelter to see anywhere but the mountain. It was a desperate attempt at survival.

All the village had departed to take shelter at a place I called "WHO!" and it was a challenge I set for myself to build a home.

I needed to build a home for myself—I needed to survive this cold or be lost in the sub-zero temperatures of December.

"I will take this stone and make it work for me!" said the Grinch—a man with a heart freezing out of his chest and the earth spinning around a sub-zero moon and a sun that lost its light.

"Boom!"

"Plow!"

"Blat!"

I beat at the base of the mountain for so long that I started to make a dent in it—for a cave. There were no tools at the time, or very few, since the village had predicted the event.

"Help me!!!!!" I yelled.

The pine trees around suddenly felt more significant—decorating the incoming winter storm and the harsh weather change. It was maybe ten days where I could not understand how I could survive this cold change and physical transformation.

Flinging more stones and deciding that if an emergency was definite, I would resort to the use of lumber and other items to make a shelter.

"Thooowsh!" I tossed a stone! And "CRACK!" The surface gave way to a cavern within the mountain—a cave was already inside.

"OOOOOOOH!!!" I yelled in victory.

Inside were tens of thousands of seeds, and I thought it perfect. I always dreamed of a thousand seeds to plant in the ground and make my garden. Today was one day to start the beginning of excellent work.

Grumble Grove I would call it—since now I could look at the amazing output of my efforts. I now had a home and plenty of lumber.

"MMMMHMMM!" I grumbled. "Why not name this place GRUMBLE GROVE?" I thought to myself.

I was very satisfied with my work and began to fashion a fireplace and a battery to warm the outside using the most common of all natural resources. Wherever one may call, I would call them a WHO—and I would observe the differences that were caused by this sudden event.

Snow began to fall, and it fell all the time. The cliff of the mountain was icy and frozen. The star would glow and turn low. I began to wonder if other people had also been affected like me—or even so differently, since this was something I could have avoided by taking shelter with the village.

My heart had shrunk, and the scabs just fell off. I felt empty and lonely. Hairy and green, I went to work at my home on Mt. Crumpet, and I created a garden to separate myself from the WHOS and I planted the seeds.

"What is your name!!" often the village would yell.

"Call me the Grinch!" I did reply—since I was embarrassed by my appearance, and I wanted men to know that it had changed indeed.

The little vines did grow, and they were also varied in shrubs and wild trees. I called them the Glums. Growing and growing, season after season.

"Bum!, Bum,!"

"Boop, Boop!"

I used to sing, although angry with the cold! I could not stop being angry and so green!

"WHO-VILLE Stay Away from me!!!" I yelled in an attempt to save the precious resource and keep it for myself.

It was fun to play games with the WHOS. In my sleep, I had visions of red clothing—probably made from trees and string from pulp and white—and a strange brown drink. I had dreams of sweet smells and bright different colors.

I began to decorate my home according to this fashion: red and white and green.

"Christmas!" I yelled. "Will always be with me!"

It was not until later a woman did approach Mt. Crumpet looking to see who or what could be found.

"Hello!" she called. "My name is Miz SCORN!"

"Ms. Scorn! It is very cold! What is it that you need?"

She replied, "Mr. Grinch, as you know the weather has changed, and I have arrived to see if the resident is still here. We have removed ourselves, and I see you have turned green. Stay here! It is what we could have foreseen. We too have had our differences happen—my ears are now pointy and I work in a new style."

"OH REALLY!" I said. "I thought I was hideous!"

"We will be at the village and I will send Cindy-Lou Who to maintain contact. There is very much to do."

A week passed after Miz Scorn's visit, but I didn't forget her words. I stayed watchful. The air was still sharp, and snow still fell endlessly, blanketing everything in silence. Grumble Grove grew thicker with vines and icy blossoms. I found myself tending my garden more carefully than ever.

Then, one evening, I heard it—footsteps, light and uncertain. And a voice, barely above a whisper.

"Hello? Is... is anyone home?"

I stood slowly and peered around the bend in the icy cave mouth. There she was: a little girl, no more than six or seven, bundled in red and pink, her cheeks rosy from the cold. Her bright blue eyes scanned the shadows fearlessly.

"You must be the Grinch," she said.

I blinked. "You must be freezing."

She nodded. "A little."

I gestured for her to come inside. She stepped in, her boots crunching softly on the gravel floor. Her eyes widened at the vines, the carved ornaments, the glowing fungus lanterns hanging from the ceiling.

"It's... beautiful!" she whispered.

No one had ever said that to me.

I cleared my throat. "You're Cindy-Lou Who?"

"That's me," she smiled. "Miz Scorn said you might be lonely."

"I was," I said honestly.

She walked around, inspecting the glowing leaves and carefully hand-chipped decorations. Then she pulled a satchel from her coat and placed it gently on a stone table near my fire.

"I brought something," she said.

I untied the satchel and looked inside: A wooden cup carved with snowflakes, a small red candle, and a thick cookie made of something warm and spiced.

"From my village," she said. "I made the cookie myself. We don't call it Christmas anymore—too many people lost the word. But we still celebrate something we call **Remembrance Day**. To remember who we are, and who we could be."

I took the candle, lit it in the hearth, and for a moment, we both sat watching the flickering flame.

"Why did you come all this way?" I asked finally.

She shrugged. "You were the only one who stayed behind. That means you were either very brave or very scared. I thought maybe you needed a friend."

I was quiet. No one had ever said *that* to me either.

Cindy-Lou stayed for a little while, helping me rearrange vines and stack firewood. She asked questions—about the mountain, about the green lights, about my garden of Glums. She wasn't afraid of my voice or my yellow eyes or my sharp, jagged grin.

"You remind me of my uncle," she said. "He's kind of hairy too."

I laughed. A strange sound. It had been so long since I'd heard it, I almost didn't recognize it.

That night, after she left, I sat alone by the fire and touched the candle she'd brought. It was still warm. Something was changing—not outside, but *inside* me.

I hadn't noticed it until that moment, but my heart... it hurt less.

She came again. And again. Day after day, climbing up to Grumble Grove, bearing gifts—scarves, dried berries, paper drawings. We sang strange songs by firelight and watched snowflakes melt on the cave ceiling.

Then one day, she asked, “Why don’t you come visit Whoville?”

I stiffened. “They wouldn’t want me.”

“You don’t know that,” she said. “Besides, Christmas is coming. You should see the lights.”

Christmas.

The word hit me like a wave. I remembered the dream again—the red clothes, the tree, the laughter. The warmth.

Maybe, I thought, just maybe...

On the night before Christmas, I wrapped myself in a fur cloak I’d stitched from bark and bramble. I carried the wooden cup and candle Cindy-Lou had given me and descended Mount Crumpet for the first time in years.

Whoville was unlike anything I’d imagined.

Bright lights hung from every home, flickering like fireflies. Garlands and streamers danced in the wind. The smell of warm spice, pine, and roasted apples filled the air. Children laughed in the streets, and their parents sang soft songs around bonfires.

And they saw me.

They turned.

I braced for screams, for fear, for shouts.

But they didn’t run. They didn’t scream.

They smiled.

“Hello!” a man called. “You must be the one Cindy-Lou told us about.”

“You’re welcome here!” said a woman holding a basket of pinecones.

Cindy-Lou rushed forward and took my hand. “This is my friend,” she announced. “He’s been living up in Grumble Grove. But tonight, he’s come home.”

For the first time, I felt no need to hide. No urge to growl or snarl. No cold bitterness in my chest.

The Who children danced in circles, and I found myself dancing too—awkwardly, but earnestly. I helped decorate the village square with vines from my garden. I placed the candle Cindy had brought in the center of the main table.

And then it happened.

A sound, small at first, then louder—my heart. Beating. Growing.

I clutched my chest. It didn't hurt. It warmed.

Three times it thumped, and with each beat, the frozen scabs that had encased my heart cracked and fell away. My chest glowed softly with light. A green star rose overhead, bright and shimmering. Not ominous this time—but welcoming.

"Look!" someone shouted. "His heart... it's glowing!"

I stood still, humbled, tears gathering in my eyes.

"Christmas," I whispered, "isn't something you decorate. It's something you share."

The snow fell gently that night, and I spent it among the Whos—laughing, singing, even sipping from the strange brown drink I once dreamed of: hot cocoa. It tasted like joy.

I returned to Grumble Grove the next morning, but I was no longer alone. The villagers came too—planting seeds, building huts, decorating trees. My little cave had become a sanctuary, not just for me, but for those seeking light in the darkness.

And Cindy-Lou? She visited often. In fact, she helped me write this.

"You should tell your story," she said. "So no one forgets."

So I did.

Now, each year, when the green star returns to the sky, the villagers gather in Grumble Grove. They bring candles, cups, cookies, and songs. They call it **The Night the Heart Grew Warm**.

They say it's about the Grinch.

But I think it's about something bigger—about forgiveness, survival, and starting again.

I look up at the green light, no longer afraid, and I smile.

And if you listen closely, you might still hear me singing:

*"Boom, boom! Boop, boop!
Christmas came through a frozen loop!
Hearts can grow, and vines can too,
When someone believes in you."

And so the seasons passed, and though winter lingered like a shadow cast by the ancient stars, the Grinch labored on—planting, tending, shaping Grumble Grove into a haven of his own making. The vines, once glums, bloomed bright in hues unknown to nature, wild and free. And though his heart remained cold at times, he learned to wrap warmth around it with the things he made: firelight, stories, and quiet laughter when he watched the WHOs from afar.

Cindy-Lou Who came often, just as Ms. Scorn had promised. She brought him tales of the changing world below the mountain, of inventions and new colors, of songs carried on wind-horns and bread made with berries and snow-sugar. And though he never stepped fully into Whoville again, the Grinch listened. He crafted gifts from wood and stone and left them hidden where the children might find them, never asking for thanks.

One day, as the auroras danced higher than ever before, Cindy-Lou placed her hand over the Grinch's chest.

"It's beating," she said softly.

He looked down, surprised. Where once there had been only frost and silence, now a warmth stirred. Faint, stubborn. Not large, but not gone.

"It's not the size of your heart that matters," she said, "but the courage it takes to let it grow again."

The Grinch stood at the edge of Mt. Crumpet, staring down at Whoville, cloaked in snow, wreathed in evergreen garlands. A smile cracked through his green cheeks. It hurt. It healed.

"Maybe one day," he whispered, "I'll come down and dance."

Until then, he returned to his garden, to the stars, to the fire. Not to hide, but to become. A legend not of bitterness—but of winter's bloom.

And so the Grinch remained, not alone, but remembered. Not cold, but kind. A guardian of Grumble Grove. A soul of snow and evergreen.

The Temporal Donut Incident

By Jonathan Olvera

Arriving in the morning was like waking up in the middle of someone else's dream—a dream full of fog, radio static, and a vague smell of burnt popcorn and lavender oil. A small farm town, mostly unchanged since the Truman administration, blinked into being under a grayish-blue sky. The centerpiece: a square, clay-brick and wooden town hall, which doubled—oddly enough—as the community meeting place and donut shop.

The sign on the front read: **WELCOME TIME TRAVELERS!** in bold, government-issued Helvetica. No explanation. Just that. Which was either charming or deeply unsettling depending on how recently you'd left your own timeline.

Inside the town hall, the scene was halfway between a community brunch and a sci-fi convention. Twenty-five or so folks had gathered—though “folks” may not be the right word. Among them were men in togas, warriors with bronze helmets, a few cyborgs sipping decaf, and one being who looked like a living mood ring with feet. They were Romans, Germans, aliens, Nephites, and people from futures so distant they didn't have vowels in their names anymore.

They called themselves the Rag-Tag Group of Time Travelers—a support group, as it turned out. Think Alcoholics Anonymous meets *Doctor Who*, but with less funding.

The air smelled like fried dough and overcooked mystery. I stepped inside, clutching a slightly crumpled dollar and twenty-five cents, suspicious of the cheerful chaos. I bought a cup of coffee and a jelly donut that looked like it had seen better centuries.

A piece of paper taped to the espresso machine read:

Welcome Time Travelers! Please behave responsibly and avoid paradoxes. Coffee refills are 75¢.

Ten minutes hadn't passed before a loud *zssssssh* sound opened the door and in walked a tall man in a trench coat with boots so shiny you could probably see your own birth in them. He was German, I was sure—he had the intense eyes and the punctual energy of someone who'd once argued with Einstein. He walked straight to the snack table and began scanning the bagels like he was looking for clues.

The buildings outside looked fake, too clean, too symmetrical. Their clay and wooden facades matched each other like Sims houses built by a really enthusiastic algorithm. Some of the aliens were clearly advanced—they had glowing collars and refused to touch anything not sterilized. One spoke only in humming noises and refused to blink.

Then... a clown showed up.

But not the funny kind. He wore normal clothes—a beige windbreaker, jeans—but his aura screamed “birthday party trauma.” His red nose was subtle but unmistakable. Everyone knew what he was. You don't forget a clown, even when they try to blend in.

And then it happened.

A green laser shot up into the air—high, humming, unnatural. The lights dimmed. Every watch in the room stopped ticking.

“I CAUGHT YOU ALL, TIME TRAVELERS!” the clown bellowed, standing atop a folding chair like it was a throne.

Some of us flinched. I didn't.

“And what are you going to do about it?” I shouted back, with the bravado of someone who still had half a donut left.

A few others nodded in agreement.

“I am aware of *all* your arrivals,” the clown went on. “The illusion has ended. Time is collapsing. And you—*you*—are the anomaly!”

Suddenly, the floor beneath us vibrated like a dying washing machine. The core of the earth, or at least this patch of it, felt like it shut off. Gravity became a suggestion. Everything flattened—reality, logic, even the coffee.

The only thing still visible was the green laser, beaming upward like the spotlight of a very confused alien god.

Then an alien stood up, a shimmering purple creature with tendrils and a voice like wind through foil. "Do not fear," he said, casually adjusting a device on his wrist. "I can recode this timeline with a complex algorithm. I just need eight minutes and a muffin."

"No need," I said, feeling bold. "We can just set the whole place on fire and hope it resets!"

"Nein," the German added. "I can build a portal using crystals and color spectrums. I've done this with scraps before. I once escaped 1347 with just quartz and a bag of Skittles."

Then the clown—yes, the clown—raised his hand and said, "I'm interdimensional. I can take us all to a dimension where everything is the same."

We all stopped.

"You can do that?" I asked.

"Sure," he replied. "It's basically like turning it off and back on again."

It was... beautiful. The simplest solution to the most absurd situation.

"Well let's do *that* then!" I yelled.

"Aye!" cried the German.

"YES, MAN!" echoed the alien.

There was a sudden, unspoken agreement. The group lined up. Everyone grabbed a coffee refill. The clown drew a strange symbol in the air using only his finger and the fog around us. Something clicked. Or maybe blinked. Or warped. Time itself gave a little burp.

"HERE WE GO!" cried the clown.

"POW!"

And we were back.

Same place. Same town hall. Donut shop still smelled like cinnamon and weird decisions. Only... a few things were off.

For starters, the coffee tasted like root beer. The jelly in my donut had turned bright blue. And the building now had a small plaque on the wall that read:

**PROPERTY OF THE INFINITE DONUT COUNCIL - REALITY
VERSION 4.7B**

I looked around. The German was browsing community announcements. The alien was making small talk with a Nephite about taxes. The clown had vanished, of course.

I blinked a few times and checked the schedule. I had errands to run anyway—dog licenses, trash pickup, maybe register as a known temporal anomaly.

What a hilarious donut and coffee event.

And that's how Thursday mornings go... when you accidentally show up to a time travel support group meeting.

Clark Kent and the Crystal Prophecy

By Jonathan Olvera

The days were simple. The nights—those were different.

While the sun commanded movement, progress, and noise, nightfall slowed everything down. Time moved thick like molasses, and the world breathed softer, more gently.

Nights were always different for Clark Kent.

Clark Kent, an ordinary man by all outward appearances, had roots in Pennsylvania. He worked a quiet job for a local publication, commuting back and forth from Neo-Metropolis, the newly revitalized version of New York City. The city pulsed with life—foreign voices, packed avenues, dreams colliding with harsh truths. Immigrants from distant worlds—some legal, some hidden—mingled with everyday citizens. Crime and charity existed in equal measure. It was a melting pot—beautiful and flawed.

Clark lived outside the noise. His home, nestled under the Canopy near the old Observatory in Pennsylvania, was where he found peace. He often spent his evenings out back, eyes lifted to the sky. The stars didn't flicker—they whispered. And they whispered to him.

He always returned to one place in his mind: a distant red star—**Proxima**. Sometimes, he would imagine himself there.

Weightless. Free.

As though gravity had no hold. As though he belonged to the flame rather than the Earth.

One night, something changed.

Clark had just finished brushing dew from the worn wooden bench in his backyard when the sky pulsed. Not lightning. Not a storm. It was a **call**. A hum in the bones. A pull on the soul.

He closed his eyes.

In the darkness behind his lids, something pulled him—gently at first, then violently—from Earth. He was hurtling through space, through time, past colors so vivid they pierced thought: streaks of blue, red, green, yellow—burning across his vision like celestial brushstrokes.

And then... stillness.

He stood on a metallic platform suspended above a shifting landscape. The atmosphere was gaseous, thick with tall green clouds. The ground below shimmered with massive crystalline structures—emerald towers jutting from a silver-gray slate like fangs. It looked... alive.

He could feel it in his skin. The green gas clung to him—not burning, not cold—**adhering**. His body vibrated with new energy, unfamiliar but not hostile.

Clark turned, taking it all in.

This world was clearly not Earth. It was **advanced**, governed by tall, elegant beings—**Guardians**, as he would come to know them. They hovered rather than walked, their heads glowing within translucent bulbs, their limbs elongated and delicate. Their voices weren't heard—they were felt, like thoughts brushing softly against his mind.

They moved toward him.

The tallest of them gestured, and a low humming sphere surrounded Clark. It tightened around his chest, almost painful, until another Guardian touched a device and dulled the pressure. He could breathe again.

The beings circled him with quiet reverence, as though they had waited a long time for this.

A soft, telepathic voice filled his mind:

"Specimen identified: Clark Kent. Earth designation. Kryptonian lineage: confirmed."

Clark's heart caught. *Kryptonian*? He had heard that name before—but only in dreams. Visions. The whisper of stars.

The Guardians began a scan. Twin beams of light passed over his skin, through his cells. The crystals beneath their feet pulsed in unison, reacting to his presence. They were alive, and they knew him.

The Guardians began to speak—of **prophecy**, of **legacy**, of a child lost to the stars and destined to return.

“The Son of Krypton,” one Guardian thought aloud.
“The one who bears the fire of Rao.”

They weren’t just studying him. They were preparing him.

An emerald altar rose from the platform, covered in etchings Clark couldn’t decipher but felt deep in his chest. His fingers brushed the surface, and in a flash—**visions**.

A city torn apart.
A planet collapsing under the weight of its own power.
Parents—his?—sending a child away in a capsule of light.

Krypton.

He wasn’t just from Earth. He had never been.

This world—their world—was calling him home.

But before he could speak, before he could fully understand, the light overtook him again. A flash of emerald and ivory fingers reached toward a console—

And then—

BOOM.

Clark gasped, choking on air. He was back. Backyard. Earth.

The sky was split by sirens.
A rumble shook the pavement.
The smell of fire.

He sat up.

From the sewers of Neo-Metropolis, a massive **creature** emerged—part crocodile, part T. rex, its teeth like shattered glass and its roar cracking windows. It **moved like memory**, stalking the streets as though it had always been there—waiting.

Clark stood, the vibration in his bones still humming from the alien world. The creature’s eyes found him. Not the city. Not the people. **Him.**

And then, to his horror, it **spoke**:

“You went to Krypton. I felt it. Now... fulfill your prophecy, Kryptonian. Or I’ll destroy everything you love.”

It wasn’t just a monster—it **knew**. It remembered. It had seen what he saw.

The panic in Clark's chest was replaced by **resolve**. The transformation was instinctual. No fear. No doubt.

He rose.

Not in defiance—in **flight**.

The air beneath his feet responded to him now. He could **fly**.

A blast of heat erupted from his palms, shattering a lamppost in the distance. His vision sharpened. His heartbeat slowed.

The Guardians were right.

Clark Kent was no ordinary man.
He was Kryptonian.

He soared over the rooftops, the city flashing below him like circuitry. He had power—yes. But he also had responsibility. The monster—whatever it was—knew the truth. Knew his loved ones. And worse, it hinted at more: that Clark’s return to Krypton had awakened something.

A door that had long been sealed... had opened.

He found the creature in Midtown, tearing through cars, snapping power lines like twigs. The screams of civilians echoed in alleys and stairwells.

Clark dropped from the sky.

“Let them go,” he commanded.

The beast turned, snarling.

“You’re not ready. You still don’t understand what you are.”

“I don’t need to understand,” Clark said, fists clenched. “I just need to stop you.”

What followed was a battle unlike anything Neo-Metropolis had seen.

Blow after blow cracked pavement and splintered steel. Clark’s new strength clashed against the creature’s raw, chaotic power. Each time it landed a hit, he felt Krypton in his bones—guiding him, **fueling** him.

But it wasn’t enough.

He remembered the Guardians. The **crystals**. The altar.

If he could return—just for a moment—he could find what he needed. A weapon. A truth. Something.

He disengaged, soaring skyward as the creature roared behind him.

Up through the clouds, beyond Earth's orbit.

The prism of space called again, and Clark Kent—**Kal-El**—answered.

In a blink, he was back on Krypton. The Guardians were waiting.

“You are not alone,” one said.

“The monster is of Krypton's shadow—Zarakk, a failed creation of the old wars. He followed your energy trail.”

Clark stood before the altar again. The crystal glowed brighter than before.

“How do I stop him?” he asked.

The answer was simple.

“With truth.”

They handed him a shard—crystalized memory, pulsing with Kryptonian code. It wasn't a weapon. It was **identity**.

He returned to Earth like lightning, crashing into the city like a comet. Zarakk turned just in time to see the glowing crystal in Clark's hands.

“This ends now.”

Clark drove the shard into the ground.

A wave of light erupted—blinding, beautiful.

Zarakk screamed. His form shimmered, then began to dissolve—his connection to Krypton severed. The air grew still.

The people stared in silence.

Clark Kent stood in the crater, chest rising and falling.

He had found his past. Embraced his future.

And the city had a new name for him—**Superman**.

The Prism of the Titans

by Jonathan Olvera

Before the Earth took shape as we know it—before continents divided, before oceans breathed—there existed a temple. Ancient, sacred, and unseen by the eyes of time, it was known only to the worthy: the caretakers of the titans and the keepers of balance between the realms of creation.

This temple was a shrine to both the monkey and the earth.

Its foundation rested upon the four elemental planes—fire, wind, earth, and water. Within its boundaries, time was irrelevant, and truth was fluid. The monkeys, ancient and wise, had existed long before humanity walked upright. They climbed through winds, swung through trees, walked on sacred soil, and meditated upside down—contemplating the great transformation that loomed in the folds of the universe.

They were not just animals; they were stewards, bound by oath to the titans and the divine work of the Creator.

The world was still malleable, like clay upon the potter's wheel. Light pierced through the cracks in the sky, searing the stone, streaking the air with fire and shadow. The sun, in its youth, was fierce and unrelenting, burning through the heavens with no mercy. The monkeys, exposed to its violent rays, prayed and meditated, calling upon the elemental guardians to shield them from the change.

Their prayers were heard, but not in the way they expected.

The transformation came.

The sun's unyielding heat turned the monkeys to stone.

Not just stone—but monuments. Statues carved by the hand of the universe itself, their features frozen in eternal meditation. Through firestorms and swirling winds, the ground beneath them hardened. The canvas of creation folded like a page in a cosmic book. The once-blue ocean was pressed into crystalline diamonds—blue and glimmering like frozen tears of the sea.

The sun, burning with celestial wrath, began to collapse. It was not a natural death. The Black Titan appeared, a colossal figure whose hand could hold the sun like a candle. With one great gesture, he crushed the sun's core—smothering its fire, extinguishing its rage.

Yet death was never the end. The Earth watched this destruction with solemn grace. In witnessing the fall of light, it swore an oath: to hold the blood and memory of the Creator within itself. It drank the light. It absorbed the sacrifice. And from that sacrifice, red diamonds grew—piercing the earth like sacred fruit, the seeds of divine memory.

Then, in the silence that followed the sun's fall, the crushed light began to speak.

The sun, in its last breath, gave its essence to the elements. Yellow flames sparked to life, forging golden stones. The red, blue, and yellow diamonds merged in piles beneath the blackened sky, awaiting a new design. As the Black Titan turned away, a new order emerged: the world shifted once more from a prism of dimensions into an ocean prison—where light was bound, and monkeys turned to statues awaited release.

The elements bowed to the will of the titans. Fire, Water, Wind, and Earth danced in obedience, creating thousands of orbits, spinning life and meaning into the cosmos. The metals of the world stretched into a molten sky, forming clouds of orange heat that funneled into the heart of the Black Titan. Through him, the energy was transformed—delivered into a green pasture, fertile and untouched, where time began again.

Here, the stone monkeys stood. Silent witnesses. Each one a relic of the past, housing memories not their own but shared across the eternal mind of the universe.

And in the center of this green world lay the artifact.

An orb, carved from the fused diamonds—red, yellow, and blue, pulsing softly with light that shifted like breath. It was not merely a relic; it was alive. It was memory. It was the last echo of the Creator's will and the first breath of a new age.

Whoever touched the orb would awaken visions—not dreams, but truths. It would reveal lost memories, not just of self, but of the cosmos. It could alter perception, bend reality, turn myth into memory and memory into prophecy.

The artifact waited, patient and perfect, surrounded by the stone guardians—monkeys posed in meditation, still watching the skies for signs of change.

A traveler will come.

He—or she—will stumble upon the green pasture, guided by instinct or fate. They will see the statues. They will hear whispers not with their ears but with their soul. They will feel the heat of a sun long extinguished, the breath of a wind that no longer blows, the tremble of a fire sealed in stone.

And they will touch the orb.

When they do, the past will awaken. The Black Titan will stir. The oceans may rise again into prisms of color. The monkeys may blink, breathe, and speak. The shrine to earth and beast will reopen its gates.

And then, we will remember.

The world we know is not the first. The past is not behind us—it is beneath us, wrapped in stone and sealed by time. But memory has a voice, and when the artifact sings, all truths return.

This is the legacy of the titans.

This is the Prism of the Creator.

And it begins again.

Caffeinated by Christ: The Divine Struggle of Aloe Vera

A tale of color, caffeine, and Catholic creativity in the desert

In a sun-scorched corner of a forgotten desert town, where the only thing holier than the church was the espresso machine at the corner bodega, lived a man named **Aloe Vera**.

Yes, that was his real name. His mother, a devout woman with a deep love for succulents and saints, believed it sounded “refreshingly spiritual.”

And Aloe did his best to live up to it.

Known among the parishioners for his intense dedication to faith, home decor, and aggressive art projects, Aloe Vera had one mission: to beautify the local Catholic assembly hall with something so inspired, so *divinely abstract*, that even the nuns would cry.

Not from confusion this time.

Aloe lived in a modest adobe hut filled with Catholic candles, secondhand art supplies, and—most notably—**coffee**. Gallons of it. His kitchen looked like a Starbucks married a monastery.

Each morning, he'd rise before the sun, grind beans with the reverence of a monk blessing bread, and whisper, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Roast." He referred to his espresso machine as **The Blessed Bean Giver**, and yes—he had baptized it with holy water. Twice.

By night, he read the Bible under starlight, sipping deeply from his chipped mug, the words of Leviticus and Luke swirling in his caffeine-fueled brain like a latte with too much foam.

It was during one such night, somewhere between his fourth cup and a deep dive into Genesis, that Aloe received what he could only describe as a "**divine download.**"

He stared up at the stars and saw a vision: six glowing squares, arranged like a heavenly game of bingo. Red, blue, yellow, black, white, and... chartreuse? (He'd had a lot of espresso.)

"It's... it's the separation of light from darkness!" he gasped, brushing coffee grounds off his Bible. "It's Creation! It's... modern art!"

He leapt up, knocking over his cat, *St. Pouncelot*, and shouted, "I must paint the Gospel in *primary colors!*"

The next day, with the desert sun blazing like a judgmental seraph, Aloe began his work.

He painted furiously, sweat pouring down his back, coffee cup clutched in one hand, brush in the other. He didn't even notice that he'd dipped his sponge into a mug instead of his rinse cup.

That's how he invented his signature medium: **espresso-infused acrylic**.

He created a masterpiece: six bold squares—red for blood, blue for water, yellow for holy light, black for sin, white for redemption, and the last... well, the last one was an accident involving creamer. But it looked holy, in a dairy sort of way.

He titled the painting:

“Genesis: But Make It Abstract.”

When he showed it to Sister Dolores, she stared in silence for a long time, squinting. Then she said, “This is either heresy... or genius. Possibly both.”

Encouraged, Aloe cleaned his brushes with reverence. He used the same sponge he’d once used to scrub the baptismal font, which he considered “holy by proxy.”

Each night he would pray:

“Lord, grant me clean water, steady hands, and better lighting in this dusty shack.”

And each morning he’d wake up and drink more coffee than any man legally should.

But time was running out.

The church was hosting its annual **Feast of the Flaming Doves**, and Aloe had promised Father Arturo he’d decorate the entire sanctuary with his “modern sacred visions.” He had three days, a dozen canvases, and exactly **zero dollars**.

Motivated equally by devotion and a desperate need for gas money, Aloe painted faster. His eyeballs twitched. His hands trembled. He was producing art so quickly that even his dreams were becoming cubist.

At one point he accidentally painted a confessional red and labeled it “Forgiveness, in Crimson.” It was sold on Etsy for \$65.

Sleep-deprived and over-caffeinated, Aloe began having *visions*.

He claimed a cactus told him to “use more yellow, bro—it’s a holy color.”

He tried to repaint the Stations of the Cross in abstract form but got distracted halfway through and turned one into a Picasso-style depiction of the Last Supper, where Judas was a floating triangle.

When asked what it meant, he said, “Betrayal. Geometry. The Eucharist. It’s all connected.”

Finally, the day of the Feast arrived.

The townsfolk filed into the sanctuary. The air smelled like incense and slightly burnt coffee. Sunlight streamed through the stained glass—and splashed directly onto Aloe’s paintings, which now lined the walls, pillars, and, for some reason, the holy water font.

Each piece had a title card, like:

- **“Luke, But with Lines”**
- **“Sin and Salvation in CMYK”**
- **“The Beatitudes as Color Theory”**
- **“Thou Art”**

The crowd was silent. Some nodded thoughtfully. Others looked deeply confused.

One man muttered, “Is that supposed to be Saint Paul or a Rubik’s cube?”

Then Sister Dolores stepped forward and clapped twice.

“This,” she said, voice ringing across the pews, “is... something else.”

A pause.

“AND I LOVE IT.”

The church erupted in polite applause. Aloe bowed, nearly knocking over the Paschal candle.

He was later given a certificate for **“Outstanding Contribution to Abstract Catholic Expressionism,”** a \$15 gift card to the church thrift shop, and a job offer from the Diocese Art Guild—which he politely declined because they didn’t allow espresso machines in the studio.

That night, Aloe returned home, lit his devotional candles, and opened his Bible to Psalms.

He sipped his coffee slowly, reverently, and whispered:

“The Lord is my barista. I shall not want.”

Robin Hood and the Very Confused Deer

It was hot.

Robin Hood sat in a pasture, squinting at the sun as it blazed a hole straight through the sky and into his skull. Sweat rolled down his back. His bow lay across a mossy stone, gathering more heat than a roast chicken at a noble's feast.

About fifteen yards away, a young deer stood nibbling grass. It looked plump. Tasty, even.

Robin lifted his bow halfway, then sighed and dropped it again. “Nay,” he muttered. “I’d rather roast than run in this heat.”

Besides, the deer was standing near a patch of wild rice and hops — fine ingredients for ale. If the deer fell into the brew, it might ruin the flavor. Robin couldn’t have that.

It would’ve been a peaceful afternoon if not for the man in blue doing *very weird things* near a mirror.

Robin frowned. A tall mirror leaned crookedly between two stones. Beside it, a man in a blue tunic poked the dirt with what looked like a bundle of walking sticks. Occasionally he muttered something like, “No, no, that’s too much carrot,” or “One turnip, two turnips, zap.”

Robin stood and called out: “Say, man!”

The sorcerer jumped, startled. “What? Who?”

“Thou there! Yes, you! What doth thou... earn-est? Or... conjure-est?”

The man looked up, blinking behind round spectacles. “I’m changing the weather.”

“Are you now?” Robin said, hands on hips. “Looks more like you’re poking salad.”

The man pointed a stick at the mirror. “This mirror regulates sunbeams. If I get the angle just right, I can make it snow.”

Robin wiped sweat from his brow. “In July?”

“Don’t look now,” the man said with a dramatic flare of his arms. “One... two... three... *POOF!*”

With a very unimpressive *poof* and a slightly louder *plop*, the sorcerer turned into a deer.

He blinked, wobbled on his new legs, looked down at his hooves, and then took off into the woods like someone had just invented lion-shaped arrows.

Robin stared. Then I looked at the mirror.

Then back at the sticks.

Then at the empty spot where the wizard had once stood.

“...What in the name of Friar Tuck’s left boot just happened?”

He walked over to the mirror, squinted at his reflection, and poked the surface. It had turned to stone. Solid as a tax collector's heart.

"Well," Robin said, dusting his hands, "that's probably fine."

Still, the situation felt... magical. And not in the good way, like when you find three extra sausages at breakfast. No — this was the *confusing, possibly cursed* kind of magic.

"Maybe I've inhaled too much hop pollen," Robin muttered, poking around the rice stalks for any suspicious mushrooms. He even sniffed a few. "Smells like salad. Tastes like regret."

The wind picked up.

Then something weird happened. Again.

The mirror flickered. It *shouldn't have*, seeing as it was stone now. But flicker it did. And Robin saw... himself.

Only older. With a bigger beard. And significantly less hair on top.

The reflection leaned forward and spoke. "Don't let him stay a deer," it said in a haunting, echoing voice. "Seriously. He owes me five gold."

Robin jumped back, knocking over a bag of hops. "Sweet Nottingham—!"

Then the mirror cracked. Crumbled. Turned into a pile of rock dust and one very confused squirrel, who scampered away like it owed taxes.

Robin stared at the pile, then down at the bundle of sticks the wizard had dropped.

"Well," he said, grabbing the sticks. "Guess I'm rescuing a deer today."

Two hours later...

Robin crept through the forest, crouched low. He held a fistful of rice in one hand and a carrot in the other.

"Here, magic deer..." he whispered. "Come out, little sorcerer..."

There was a rustle.

A deer popped its head out from behind a tree.

Robin squinted. "Is that you?"

The deer made a sound that could only be described as "*magic panic*."

It tried to run.

Robin tossed a carrot.

The deer stopped.

"Thought so," Robin said, grinning.

He held up the bundle of sticks. "You turn back with these, right? Come on. Nod if yes."

The deer just looked confused. Then it sneezed. A bunch of glitter came out.

"Well, that's new," Robin muttered.

Eventually, he coaxed the deer back to the pasture. He laid the sticks in a circle, stacked the leftover hops, and placed what was left of the mirror dust in the center.

"Okay. Magic stuff. Hocus pocus. Please don't explode."

He poked the sticks.

Nothing.

He tapped the deer on the nose.

Nothing.

He sighed. "Alright, listen. If you can hear me in there, think really hard about your taxes. That usually brings people back."

The deer shuddered.

Suddenly — *Poof!*

The man in the blue tunic was back — lying on his back, blinking at the sky, and covered in hop vines.

Robin grinned. "You owe me a beer."

The man groaned. "And five gold..."

Robin helped him up. "Next time, maybe try weather magic *indoors?*"

The sorcerer nodded weakly. "And avoid mirrors. And deer. And talking to men with bows."

Robin patted him on the back. "Don't worry, friend. Your secret's safe with me."

Then he held up a bottle of freshly brewed ale — cold, golden, and fizzing at the top.

“Now *this* is magic.”

The House of Bats

By Jonathan Olvera

Bruce Wayne was more than just a man in Gotham — he was legend, shadow, legacy, and wealth incarnate. To the city, he appeared as a well-bred billionaire, living in the manor his ancestors built stone by stone. But those close to him — what few there were — whispered of something more ancient. It was said his fortune had endured for not decades, but millennia. That the Wayne name echoed

through time thanks to humility, calculation, and, as some dared mutter, aid from other dimensions.

In those obscure accounts, they claimed that Bruce had aligned himself with forgotten beings — immortals and nightwalkers. One name recurred in forbidden texts: **Dracula**. Together, they shared a bond not of blood, but of hunger — a hunger for permanence, for legacy, for mastery over death and time. Their pact ensured the Wayne line would never fall into ruin. Through a quiet exchange of rituals, relics, and bloodstones, Bruce maintained control over wealth unimaginable, hoarded in vaults and chambers below the earth.

Wayne Manor stood tall above the cliffs of Gotham, its terraces winding through hedgerows sculpted by a master gardener who had all but given up his own name in devotion to the estate. The grounds shimmered under moonlight, too pristine to be maintained by human hands alone. At the edge of the estate sat an expansive park, grown wilder toward the boundaries — nature carefully allowed to pretend it was free.

Bruce's father, Judge Thomas Wayne, had been an emblem of order — a man of sharp words and steady judgment. He governed the family with fairness, but also strategy. Politics, he told his son, were just interpretations of power. With over a thousand servants under their employ, every movement within the estate was a choreography of duty and silence. Chores weren't performed — they were enacted, like rituals in a private religion of loyalty and wealth.

As Bruce grew, so too did the Manor. Wings were added, secret halls extended. Beneath it all, the subterranean vaults dug deeper, down toward the ancient stone. The Wayne estate honored every land deal, every acquisition, with solemn precision. To the people of Gotham, the Waynes were a trustworthy, if strange, dynasty — always paying their debts, always maintaining the peace.

But there were oddities.

There was the terrace that would flood every decade, not from rain, but from the nearby Gotham water source that Bruce redirected personally. He had dug a great well there, with a secret reservoir capable of holding and treating thousands of gallons. He would often sprinkle a powder into it — a white dust that hissed and bubbled, eating away at stone to deepen the chamber further. No one ever asked what the powder was.

And then there were the bats.

They arrived quietly, years into Bruce's youth. At first just one — a sickly thing that fluttered near the well. But Bruce saw something in it: endurance, clarity, silence. Within a year, the estate was filled with them. During the day, they slept in the hidden crevices of the manor. At night, they poured from the well like smoke, keeping watch over the lands.

Bruce would lie awake some nights just to watch them swirl under the stars. He felt a kinship with them — creatures of night, of silence, of misunderstood purpose.

His education was handled within the estate. Tutors taught him mathematics, philosophy, currency, agriculture. He learned how to be fair, and how to seem fairer. He learned how to weigh coins not just by metal, but by the power they carried. Each meal was inspected by him personally — pork and turkey, wild-caught and brought from estate lands. He tracked not only the meal, but the hunt, the labor, the hands that prepared it.

Every part of the estate, every servant, every decision — Bruce weighed it all. Not out of obsession, but preparation.

For he knew what was coming.

He knew from a young age that to inherit such a legacy — one forged with blood rituals, bargains with the forgotten, and boundless responsibility — he would have to become more than a man.

He would have to become myth.

And so he trained. Quietly. Vigorously. Not in the open, not with flamboyance like the heroes in pulp stories. He prepared in the shadows of the estate, beneath the flicker of gaslight, surrounded by books that predated nations.

He was not merely training to be a hero. He was becoming **a symbol** — something that would last when men perished and cities turned to ruin. Something that would haunt evil and protect the innocent. Something born of night and discipline.

There was no single day when Bruce Wayne became the Batman. It was gradual — like dusk falling. He had always been becoming.

And Gotham, though it didn't yet know, was already beginning to feel it.

The estate, the stones, the rituals, the silence — they were not history. They were armor.

And beneath it all, deep in the well where the bats sang softly in the dark, his destiny stirred.

The Green Flame: Origin of the Martian Manhunter

It was a green and foggy morrow on the wide crystal banks that lined the molten edges of the ancient Kryptonian surface — where liquid crystals oozed across the stone, steaming with heat and biting into the great prism fields below.

The **Purple Sun of Krypton** turned overhead, casting a cosmic lightshow across the horizon, shimmering against the jagged peaks of energy-charged spires. On this rare day, the sky wept with eruptions — not of fire or smoke, but of **living crystal**, green and hot, humming with the pulse of planetary memory.

Molten **Kryptonite**, in its most primal form, fumed upward — boiling into the atmosphere. From the depths of the core, the heart of the planet exhaled its power, erupting in a slow storm of matter and memory. As the energies collided with the strange rotational pull of the purple sun, an anomaly formed in the sky: **a floating orb**, suspended in time — **liquid metal encased in a crust of crystalline light**.

This was no accident.

This was **genesis**.

Krypton, long known to few as a planet of unimaginable elemental chaos, birthed strange phenomena — natural yet orchestrated, scientific yet unknowable. In this rare event, a **construct was born**: an orb of intelligence, alive in the silent rhythm of light. From within, time folded inward. Neural threads formed. A **cognitive seed** sparked. Thought spiraled into design. The shell pulsated, evolved — black lenses forming like eyes, strands of silicon mimicking nerve endings.

It was not alive in the way other beings were. It was **something older, and newer, all at once** — born not from parents, but from **purpose**.

The orb's mind projected visions. It saw solar winds carrying color across emptiness. It heard rain from distant systems. It dreamed in radiation and awoke in silence.

Then, it began to **engrave**.

Using the body of the planet itself, the beings — now many, now a race — **cut deep into Krypton's surface**. Their glyphs etched history into crystal. They called themselves **Guardians of the Flame**, not Martians, not machines. Their task was not to rule, but to remember, to prepare. Their civilization was shaped by silence and pressure, their culture carved into green crystal veins.

They split into forms — male, female, others — chosen not by birth but by purpose. Their society was fluid, adaptive, mobile. They watched the cosmos from beneath the surface of the planet, **peering through lenses of obsidian**, observing galactic chaos and planning their own rise.

Then, the eruption came.

The largest in generations.

Crystals exploded skyward, and the purple sun briefly darkened under the smoke of memory. The elders gathered, not in fear, but in **reverence**. They saw it as a signal. A time of creation. In the afterglow, they planted a new seed — a second orb, similar to the first, but different in intention.

This one was **green**, heavy with encoded power.

This would be their **gift to the universe** — a being of strength, intelligence, sorrow, and flame. Not a guardian of Krypton, but a **guardian of other worlds**.

They infused it with the memory of stars. Beams of energy danced across the seed as they etched a name into its core:

J'onn

A worker. A burdened soul. A protector. A watcher from the shadows.

They shaped him not for Krypton, but for **Mars** — a planet of silence, red winds, and ancient war. Mars needed healing. It needed justice. And this being would **walk the lonely path to provide it**.

He was not Martian by blood. He was **Martian by purpose**.

Born of Krypton, wrapped in flame, fed by the dust of stars, and awakened by the silence of Mars' twin moons.

And so J'onn was launched across the void — not in a ship, but as **a living ember**, wrapped in crystal, driven by cosmic winds. He landed in the red sands of Mars long before its fall. He learned their ways. Took on their shape. Mourned their wars. Loved their children.

He became one of them.

And when Mars fell to fire, to plague, to the madness of its own making, J'onn stood alone — **last of his kind**, and yet not truly Martian. Not truly Kryptonian. Something else.

A flame of justice. A ghost of memory.

The Martian Manhunter.

He would roam the stars after that, driven by duty, haunted by loss. Earth would become his second home — its people broken, its heroes fragile, its darkness familiar. There he would hide in human skin, walk among detectives and dreamers, search for purpose beneath city lights.

And when the time came to rise — to reveal himself — he would not do it for glory.

He would do it for the memory of the green morning, the purple sun, and the eternal voice that first called his name.

✦ **Thank You for Reading** ✦

A Collection of Short Stories #2
by Jonathan Olvera

To those who traveled through desert kingdoms, caffeinated prophecies, lunar gateways, suburban espionage, and emotional multiverses — thank you. Each story in this collection was written not only to entertain, but to ignite something deeper: curiosity, reflection, wonder, laughter.

This book is a celebration of voices — real and imagined, sacred and absurd, ancient and futuristic. It's about finding truth in fiction, connection in chaos, and meaning in the most unexpected corners of narrative life.

I hope that within these pages, you met characters who surprised you, challenged you, or simply made you smile. If a single line stayed with you, or if a single idea stirred something new in you, then this book has done its work.

More stories are always on the horizon. Until then, may your imagination remain wild, your humor unshaken, and your spirit ever searching.

— *Jonathan Olvera*

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**Connect, Reflect, and Share:
jonolvera776@gmail.com
Phoenix, Arizona
www.jonathanolvera.com**

About the Author:

Jonathan Olvera is a passionate writer and storyteller based in Phoenix, Arizona. With a background in Literature and Journalism, he has long been captivated by

the power of words to bridge cultures, spark connections, and illuminate the human experience.

Jonathan's writing often explores themes of national identity, resilience, and love, reflecting his thoughtful engagement with history, society, and the complexities of the human spirit. His stories aim to capture the subtle beauty of everyday life while also delving into larger questions about belonging, leadership, and transformation.

When he's not writing, Jonathan finds inspiration in the world around him—whether by hiking Arizona's desert trails, painting vivid landscapes, or volunteering in his community. These experiences deepen his storytelling, allowing him to weave authenticity, empathy, and a sense of adventure into his narratives.

Driven by the belief that every story holds the potential to change perspectives, Jonathan Olvera is dedicated to crafting tales that resonate with readers and invite them to see the world through new eyes.